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MODERN POETRY

MODERN POETRY

by

H. P. COLLINS

Quelquefois un besoin de phil-
osopher gâte tout

JOUBERT



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To
MY UNCLE

A RATHER GOOD CLASSICAL SCHOLAR
WHO NEVER OPENS A BOOK OF MODERN POETRY
AND WHEN HE FINDS IT QUOTED
SKIPS IT

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NOTE

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H. P. C.

'H. D. has a vision of the world she shares with none,' wrote Mr. F. S. Flint some three or four years ago. 'It is her own unique possession. . . . She may be the most exquisite English poet we have.' Perhaps exquisiteness is not the quality one is most anxious to welcome in contemporary poetry; perhaps H. D.'s unique vision has not yet embraced the world. But her subsequent publications have only served to strengthen a sense of the justice of Mr. Flint's then rather lonely encomium. H. D.'s achievement, though slender, is of definite significance to English literature; it would be well to examine the nature and extent of this achievement; and so to inquire into the reasons of its limited reception in this country.

Our modern lyrical poetry, so far as it can be said to have any inherent unity at all, is in a tradition you would most aptly describe as negative, as being a revolt against the conventions of the previous age. To what extent this reaction was necessary or desirable it may be left to the historian of a later day to determine: it is certainly ill-justified of its fruits. The minor poets of the later Victorian era were not on the whole a powerful group; but their work leaves an impression of discipline and self-completeness. They had a sense of literary responsibility, and a

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regard for form. But they had little originality and little impulse to express profound or uncommon emotions. So they were, generally, tending backwards rather than forwards.

Our minor poetry, thus static, was open to external influences; it proved unable to assimilate them. Two successive revolts came about: the *Æsthetic* movement and the *Yellow Book*. Both had their origin in a perversion of *fin-de-siècle* French traditions. French poetry has never had a durably vitalizing effect upon English poetry. The reason is, roughly speaking, that the French genius is either comparatively shallow or intensely national. An English translation of Baudelaire, to take a most relevant example, is impossible. This does not apply so much to all the Latin races; but France has an incommunicable idiom of speech and a peculiar artistic attitude that is rooted deep in many centuries. This attitude, method, — what you will — is classicist in origin; but neo-classical and formal in all its serious developments. It is not Greek or simple; and it does not admit of the romantic expansion of most great modern art. Our own poetry since the nineties has tended to discard form and to grow increasingly and rather futilely romantic. Where it has proceeded on this course it has achieved little of abiding import-

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ance. Anyhow, both the pseudo-French movements were deservedly almost sterile; and the most significant general (as apart from personal) influence upon this period came from Ireland. And the importance of *this* must not be overestimated; it was not central.

The Celtic spirit was something to us entirely fresh; nourished centuries ago in the primitive legend and superstition of a dreaming peasantry, softened and enriched in the aura of the most romantic of all lands. Long divided from us by its adhesion to the Gaelic speech, this literary impulse is first apparent in the poetry of J. C. Mangan and in the glorious historical account of the Irish race we owe to Standish O'Grady. This is not the place in which to discuss the progress of the Celtic Renaissance and its partial merging with our own minor poetry; but two important distinctions are here relevant. Firstly, this literature is not only a question of misty twilights and Mr. Yeats; secondly, it is not inevitably romantic. Synge and Mr. Lennox Robinson, for instance, are both instinctive and successful classicists. They 'bring it off' as surely as Mr. Yeats does and as his imitators do not. On the other hand, drama since Synge has reached a technical achievement. Our best drama derives mainly from Ibsen,

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Tchehov and Synge. The combination, or fusion, is an extremely happy one, and such drama is in a healthy state. But it happens to be uninspired, and is economically handicapped. Our lyrical poetry is more inspired, but it does not 'come off.' It has not achieved a fitting tradition.

I am here guilty of the discussion of traditions and tendencies, both of which are supposed by a distinguished Professor to have an evil influence upon the young. I can only plead that any angle of approach to the chaotic problem of modern poetry is better than no approach at all. I am also guilty of generalization; which I hope to justify. I have spoken of minor poetry, but in truth the last twenty years in England have produced little else. There have been a few major poets, all strong individualists, but it seems to confirm my assumption of a weak and ineffectual tradition that these men almost alone stand outside it. There are Mr. Thomas Hardy, Francis Thompson, Mr. Charles Doughty, Wilfred Owen, and perhaps some would add Michael Field. Mr. Hardy's method is a practised refinement of the kind of poetry he was writing when Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* was still unpublished. Francis Thompson was a mystic, creating apparently from the mystic's unrestrained and spontaneous vision.

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That he, with a probably greater genius, and a more subtle culture, is less compelling than Vaughan, Crashaw or Traherne, suggests forcibly that he worked in a difficult environment. Why was it difficult? Why more difficult than the elaborate and half-fantastic technique of Crashaw? Because Thompson was conscious of, when he should have been indifferent to, his place in Time; and that place was, for him, incompatible with a free expression.

Mr. Doughty is in the front rank of our day, and he has very deliberately turned his back on our day. He writes not only from the impulse, but in the medium of a great period of our language; a period that survives in literature mainly by Spenser and Chaucer, and somehow embraces them both. This choice is probably determined in him by temperament, in which he is half akin to each of these earliest masters. He is more comprehensive; but he has infinitely less vision and poetic inspiration. It is useless to ask why; it is needless to insist that he has chosen a period before the full maturity of our language in Shakespeare, in the Authorized Version of the Bible – with a difference, in the rhetoric of Dryden. But Mr. Doughty has not fulfilled his mission as a poet. Wilfred Owen's few splendid fragments were written as earnest young men may probably be

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writing forty years hence. Cut off so unhappily, he is perhaps a forerunner, certainly not a strong contemporary influence. (*His* curious reception by the poetry-reading public is another ground of inquiry.) The work of Michael Field holds to the narrowed and scholarly convention of the eighties, enriched and subtilized. The last ten years have seen the rise of two important young poets of dramatic impulse that may carry them far — Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie and Mr. Gordon Bottomley. Critical incompetence has so involved and confused their work with that of a swarm of trivial writers that they cannot be said to stand forth with quite clear significance to the consciousness of to-day. And although one of these is among our best critics, neither has felt impelled to isolate and expound his purpose as did, for instance, Flecker. Our good criticism is notoriously uninfluential, and our bad criticism non-committal. So a true awareness of this pair of real poets would seem to lie in the uncertain future. And this is probably the case with others less recognized.

Of the Irish movement there remain two major poets, Mr. Yeats and 'A. E.' Mr. Yeats stands in a class quite by himself among modern lyrists. The term lyrical may be held to embrace *all* his work: 'The Shadowy Waters' or 'The King's Threshold' as

surely as 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' or 'Into the Twilight.' His work has a strong idiosyncrasy that is both national and personal; he is not like the English lyrical poets, but it is as a romantic lyrist that he touches our literature. He does not write in any of our traditions; his reaction to contemporary influences from this country is as negative as his reaction to the 'reds and yellows' — (whatever that may mean) — of Shelley. His appreciation of alien poetry is catholic, but it is distorted. For reasons inherent in his literary consciousness, very difficult to define, he creates always from a spontaneous and simple impulse, through an artificial and deliberate method, to a final achievement (though not impression) of simplicity. The same was true of Milton, but he was a strongly classical writer, whereas Mr. Yeats is a pure romantic. And the romantic who has an essential and insuperable artificiality of method is limited. He will never attain an 'absolute' liberation, and his romantic habit prevents the complete relation of values that is in the comedy of Synge, for example; that is the condition of classical achievement. To the classicist values are relative; to the romantic they are absolute. Mr. Yeats is not a great poet like Shelley; he is not so near greatness even as Poe. Consider one of the finest passages of Mr.

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Yeats, where the Countess Cathleen takes leave of her girls before her self-sacrifice to avert the famine among the peasantry.

'Bend down your faces, Oona and Aleel,
I gaze upon them as the swallow gazes
Upon his nest under the eaves, before
He wander the loud waters.'

BEATRICE.

'Give yourself no unnecessary pain,
My dear Lord Cardinal. Here, mother, tie
My girdle for me, and bind up this hair
In any simple knot; ay, that does well,
And yours I see is coming down. How often
Have we done this for one another; now
We shall not do it any more. My Lord,
We are quite ready. Well, 'tis very well.'

It is not a question of greater dramatic fitness; nor of the emotion of Shelley being deeper, or, through Beatrice, more deeply realized. Rather, it is not only that; for these are matters of degree and not of kind. And the difference between these two passages is one of kind; it must be *felt*. Both are the work of romantic poets at the moment of most intense control; the qualitative distinction is that between a pure and an impure state of receptiveness. The impulse of Mr.

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Yeats is just as genuine and direct, but he has exposed a simple emotion to a process of subjective and highly sensuous transformation. The result is exquisitely lovely; but it falls short of the highest poetry. Here is another, not dissimilar passage by him, even more famous.

'The years like great black oxen tread the world
And God, the herdsman, goads them on behind,
And I am broken by their passing feet.'

The beautiful expression of emotion is here of a deeper and less sensuous kind. But there are three instances of digression, of the diffusion of thought and language that renders modern poetry other, and less compelling, than that of the English masters — 'great black,' 'behind,' 'passing.' The superposed phrasing is, strictly speaking, external to the pure emotional liberation. It creates an aura of sensuous atmosphere that destroys the illusion (for the greatest art, after all, works by an illusion, a 'suspension of disbelief') of universality, of impersonal applicability. One is aware of Mr. Yeats' temperament as one would not be aware of Shelley's or Wordsworth's. The latter has nothing of such exquisite verbal grace; but hear him tell of that other mourner.

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' . . . she is known to every star
And every wind that blows;
And there, beside the thorn she sits
When the blue daylight's in the skies
And when the whirlwind's on the hill,
Or frosty air is keen and still,
And to herself she cries,
"Oh, misery! Oh, misery!
Oh, woe is me! oh, misery!" "

It may be taken, then, that Mr. Yeats' work is outside the tradition of English poetry and lacks the essential strength of that poetry where it is strong. He had touched and adorned our literature but he has not definitely influenced it. 'A. E.' at his highest is no less than Mr. Yeats, but he is by comparison little known, and cannot be regarded as a vital figure in contemporary English letters. His poetry, also, is entirely romantic; it is redolent of a strong Celtic personality steeped rather exclusively in Celtic ideas. . . . Nobody would acquit our own serious writers, of intellectual chauvinism.

II: ROMANTICISM AND LANGUAGE

IT will scarcely be denied that the technical ineffectiveness of modern verse – if we concede that its ineffectiveness *is* mainly technical – (using this term in a very comprehensive sense) – is closely related to the diffuseness of thought and language mentioned just now; which was not in the effective expression of Shelley or Wordsworth. Neither of these great poets was consistently a master of *language*; a master as was Shakespeare, a romantic; or Dryden, a classicist. It would seem, then, that vigour and economy of language exist in the highest romantic poetry, but are not a general quality of romantic literature. The successful romanticist has to win a battle over language; it is the counterbalancing difficulty in his wider emotional scope. One might adduce a very early instance by comparing a tragedy of Sophocles with a late tragedy of Euripides – the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, say, with the *Bacchæ*. In dramatic power Euripides was no greater and no less than Sophocles; but after reading the *Bacchæ* one feels that the immediate and overwhelming cogency of Sophocles' tragedy, that is the result of high poetry enforcing a tragic theme, has been replaced by something altogether different, something that leaves the impression of emotional conflict surpassing language. This inherent groping of the spirit is the element and

the essence of romantic art; the yearning that craves for expression yet defies expression; the inconclusive struggle between emotional apprehension of life and the articulation that must transcend personal emotion: these awaken in the spectator a reaction more complex and less immediate than the mental *tabula rasa* that lies clean swept after the *κάθαρσις* of classicist tragedy. The impression is delayed: one is bewildered, puzzled, groping; as after a first reading of *Hamlet*.

As Poe saw, there is no *complete* romantic art beyond a small length, for language has never achieved an entire romantic sufficiency. The nearest approach is perhaps in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. For in all prolonged romantic creation there is a certain amount of material that cannot find *artistic* expression in language. Consider 'The Excursion.' And in the highest poetry, the *Bacchæ* or *Hamlet*, there is an emotional *abandon* of language, of would-be expression, that exceeds its object. It is the liberation of some part of consciousness too deep and too mysterious to be fitted into the structure, even the implications, of the artistic process. It is, scientifically speaking, the manifestation of repressed æsthetic feeling; but such a definition advances little. While the greatness of the *Ædipus* can be under-

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stood, realized in itself, the greatness of the *Bacchæ* depends for recognition upon the recognition of something external to the pure drama, something in Euripides' apprehension of life that he could not consciously embody in the form of a conventional medium. This philosophical impulse, being absolute, 'surpasses language'; it is only sporadically liberated through speech. Therefore the effect of the whole work is a matter of suggestion, of implication ; it is capable of various interpretation. If we put any consistent interpretation upon sustained 'dramatic or lyrical work we shall find that we are viewing it as the work of *epic* creation, in the modern sense of that word. A classicist critic would deprecate the propriety for such work of the dramatic or lyrical form.

My purpose being to discuss, in view of its ultimate bearing upon our modern poetry, the relation between romantic literature and language, I fixed upon the earliest great dramatic poet who had to face the problem of that relation. Euripides found nothing to his hand that was suitable save the conventional Attic drama: its adoption gave him a hearing, and also the opportunity of liberating his subordinate yet decided lyrical genius through the Chorus. The minor structural changes which he introduced to the drama were the first step in the incessant tendency of

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all later romantic writers to mould literary forms in which their particular struggle with language should be rendered more easy. Euripides was against the gods; he wanted to voice the helplessness of humanity. He could not acquiesce in the things which his predecessors had accepted, yet he lived too early in time and thought to find an attitude which he could accept, and so reach the serenity that would have made his tragic irony communicable and supreme. The Greek spirit was around him, and to the Greek spirit no romantic can ever return.

The attitude of later romantic artists has been one of passionate protest; but they have also yearned unceasingly towards an acquiescence in ultimate things that did not trouble the Greek.

Our Elizabethans found the problem simplified. They hammered out a form for themselves, and had somehow grasped the profound truth that subjectiveness of expression is the deadly enemy of all major and sustained romantic creation. *They* had no Chorus. Nor were they hampered by, for instance, the serious mythology and the narrative obligations that almost stifled the deeper spirit of Virgil – the apprehension of fate which might, in a happier liberation, have equalled the fundamental greatness of Euripides' humanism.

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The Elizabethans, too, had something even more valuable than the inescapable dramatic objectivity that modulated their poetic impulse. They had the moulding of an absolutely plastic language. It would be absurd to maintain that there is one, and only one, great period in the history of every literature; but there is inevitably one great period in the evolution of every language. In our history the two have been confounded, naturally enough, by those to whom the Elizabethan drama really means Shakespeare. One hesitates to say whether Shakespeare did or did not materially influence the technique of English poetry. He was certainly less an influence to his immediate successors than was Jonson, whose powerful influence, descending through Dryden, swayed a century. Yet Jonson was the odd man of his age; he held isolated critical views, was rather a pedant in culture, and he contorted both poetry and comic vision in a way which, if not strictly artificial in itself, led inevitably to artificiality in the hands of his imitators of the Restoration school.

The greatness of our Elizabethan and Jacobean poetry (we must remember it was not confined to one short generation of writers) cannot be explained away by the fact that it embraced two men supreme in widely differing kinds of genius. Shakespeare

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would have wielded *any* language with equal mastery, 'therefore on him no speech.' When you put aside Shakespeare and Jonson and consider the achievement of all the others (which is homogeneous and would have been just the same, and more clearly seen, without Shakespeare and Jonson) you find that their supremacy lies; not in intellectual scope, nor finality of thought, nor subtlety, nor poetic insight, nor dramatic ability; but in language, and in the expression of a freedom and elementality of feeling which could not have been so liberated in another state of language.

It may be objected that the consciousness of an age shapes its own speech. That is true; but the age has not time to make of it an adequate vehicle of artistic expression. Modes of thought change more swiftly than modes of art. If we stress the word *art* as meaning successful art, that is too evident just now to need elaboration.

Maturity of language (which is pretty much the same thing as strength of language) precedes maturity of thought, which would comprise much more complex ingredients, and in a sense is never attained. The *thought* of the Elizabethan writers (which includes, of course, their poetic attitude to life and the instinctive ethical feeling that gives a sense of

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artistic values) was not merely very immature, but crude, in comparison, for example, with that of contemporary France or Italy. Yet our Elizabethans achieved a body of artistic work, and a tradition, that are unsurpassed. It is undeniable that in other periods literature has been more widely, more variously, more subtly inspired, and conditions have been infinitely more favourable to its free production. The England of sixty years ago, the England of a hundred years ago, gives such instances.

When we consider that the strictly Elizabethan tradition is posterior to Marlowe and excludes Jonson and cannot be said to reach Shakespeare, we shall find its poetic heights in Chapman, Webster and Ford; its dramatic heights in Fletcher and Tourneur. And these were not very great writers and were far indeed from being great thinkers. Yet no romantic artist in the eternal, uphill struggle with language has ever done more triumphantly than they. The reason is that whereas thought is almost always ahead of language, too difficult for language, they found language fresh and plastic and shaped it easily to something greater than their own thought; something that entirely embodied their inspirations, magnified and strengthened them with its own vigour. They were behind language; romantic creation in

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general is 'too much' for language. So would have been the genius of Shakespeare but that in his hands, and his alone, language knew no insufficiency. The translators of the Bible and Dryden also had complete mastery of language; but the translators were not original thinkers in the terms of their own age; Dryden was a classicist and is outside the argument.

III: POETIC CREATION

THE problem that a contemporary criticism of poetry has to face is a multiform one, but its principal aspects may admit of a helpful classification. All writing is the expression, in some degree, of a personality; yet poetry is most valuable when it is most impersonal. For poetry is the embodiment of perceptions, or intuitions, in the language of 'power.' How is this 'power' or æsthetic cogency achieved, and how do we recognize it?

Every perception, or recognition of value, is lyrical. It is impelled by the nature of things; it strikes the receptive mind in one way, though perhaps no two minds may react to it alike.

Croce maintains that all literature is lyrical; that it consists of a series of æsthetic perceptions and has no other significant quality. I dissent from this view: it seems to me that in sustained creation perceptions are related by personality, and when that relation is successfully made, the artist has found personal expression in one of the various forms of art. But an *unrealized* intuition is not measurable. It has a greater or less value, or fails to have value, according to the personality into which it is absorbed. The personality reacts by that state of consciousness which was suited to perceive. But consciousness is affected, is altered and expanded by the perception,

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and it is the consciousness thus expanded in absorbing something external that seeks expression. So the mind of the poet realizing his intuitions is not in a normal state; it is unbalanced, and the act of symbolic equivalence (or however the act of creation be defined) varies as it has to adjust the balance – as would the motion of a pole seized by a tight-rope walker to prevent his fall.

In the passages of Shelley and Mr. Yeats which I compared, a similar emotional intuition struck two different minds: Shelley's reaction was more violent since his perception was less overlaid by a preconceived mode of æsthetic feeling; it had to adjust itself with a greater directness and strength, and – since Shelley was by our metaphor a supremely skilful rope-walker – he was able to make the recovery finely. Had he been a less spontaneous poet, with the same sensibility, the perception would have overpowered him; he would have lost balance, been unable to write. This is why a poet without natural technique cannot face big subjects; his reaction is not strong and spontaneous. *And technique is chiefly a matter of tradition.*

I hope, at this stage, that I have justified my digressive manner by showing in argument that our poetry wants two things: a tradition, and, since it will be

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romantic, a preoccupation with the question of language. These are, of course, among the chief aspects under which the contemporary critic should ponder its achievements and future.

How, we have asked, is the power of art made recognizable? The material of poetry seems to be in its crude state impersonal: in its æsthetic shaping to have become a personal declaration. Yet personal declaration is not always a work of art. It is only *expressive* when it finds a repercussion in other, or other possible, sensibilities. I assume that no two sensibilities can be quite alike. The business of the artist is to make other sensibilities feel some thing, or rather sequence of things, as he himself feels it. He appeals through the emotions, the intellect, and the sense of form of sound or colour or language, according as he is sculptor, musician, painter or poet.

All true art has some quality of universality, and thus soars beyond personal experience. By this it is to be known. How does the poet, liberating his own state of mind after an intuitional experience, acquire this wider compulsion? As literature is a representative art he will need to have perceived something *real*.

The one type of true literature which is not representative, the 'ecstatic' lyric, embodies a unique,

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single, transcendental perception; it is the offshoot of a virtual self-suppression for the moment in the poet, and is very rare. It has existence and appeal in a sphere of its own. It is not, in short, anthropocentric. It has a kind of equivalent in 'lyrical' music. It would need to be discussed separately.

The reality from which valuable literary perceptions are made is not, obviously, a narrowed scientific 'actuality.' But I do not use the word here in any metaphysical or mystical sense. Reality is that which is valid to the ultimate experience or intuition of humanity. That it can be felt where it exists is one of the mysteries of art. The unreal always shows up in the process of artistic transmission. The real alone is written in the sense that 'things written endure.'

Whatever is real has clearly a universal applicability. It does not follow that all reality is good material for art; there are degrees of æsthetic promise. 'To make a fairer face than Heaven of dust' — the aim of our most austere modern realists — is possible, but it depends on the dust and the maker. Given a *poietes* competent of his dust, 'loving his stones,' it can be done; for the dust is real as he grasps it; the face fairer than Heaven, of universal beauty, is attainable. How create it?

This is the central problem of literary creation, the

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transmission of a valid perception of reality through an individual mind to comprehensive, impersonal utterance. I have tried to show how this depends on a state of consciousness in the poet; a clearness of receptivity; a readiness of emotional adjustment, and a free possession of language. When the poet so prepared has an intuition of value, he should be able to express it through the symbol or equivalence that his experience provides. Since the intuition was real, if it is truly conveyed it will bear the stamp of truth. And that truth will be in itself poetry; it will suffice in its own beauty, be as fair as Heaven. Its degree of value will depend upon the importance to the poet of the basic perception, and his power of imaginative realization.

This does not of course pretend to be a final analysis. If such could be made criticism would have gone far indeed. We know that one choice and order of words is effective poetically while another is not, but we know it only by intuition. The theory of poetic inevitability may be a heresy; but it has never been disposed of and is extremely plausible. At present it casts the onus of poet achievement on the poet's intuitions of language. While all art revolves, by common consent, in the sphere of intuitions, criticism cannot get behind them.

IV: THE NEED OF VALUES

‘If we are told that in order to get at reality we must abandon intellect for intuition, the obvious reply is that only by means of the intellect can we lay the foundations of a philosophy of intuition.’

IRVING BABBITT.

IT was not my intention, in approaching the study of modern poetry, to formulate any theory of æsthetic, but rather to let what views of criticism lay at the back of my opinions emerge in a way that would not obtrude upon direct critical discussion. But it is merely deceptive to try to give the impression that one’s criticism is – what I have said it never can be – impersonal. I have no great faith in any general theory of art; perhaps because none coincides with the theory which no doubt I unconsciously hold! But if one is going to make judgments – and that is a necessity – one can mitigate the natural objection to all dogmas by showing to some extent what they are based on; it is well to play with one’s cards on the table when practicable. I wish to make plain my belief that a conception of the process and order of æsthetic creation, and of the nature and difference between various manifestations of art (such as the classical and the romantic) is a more necessary and less pretentious and arbitrary thing than is an æsthetic.

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I do not claim, for instance, that my adumbration of the tendency I call romanticism displaces or corrects anybody else's definition, but the tendency is to me real, and I must express it in order to formulate my ideas. I might simply have called the tendency *alpha* and its converse *beta*, but I preferred for many obvious reasons to use recognizable terms.

Again, I am not one of those who claim to rule out all extra-æsthetic views from their consideration of literature; who insist that they have negatived all personal philosophy. I do not think that a purely æsthetic point of view is tenable in the consideration of a representative art such as poetry, since the trivial standpoint called 'Art for Art's sake' posits a non-representational idea of literature and so not only cuts itself adrift from the foundations of critical thought but turns upon and destroys itself in depriving the *material* of art of all significance. When we measure works of art we must take into consideration the relative value of their content, their emotional and intellectual material.

Yet I know that Signor Croce, whose criticism is rightly considered to have a finality of its own, and is in the eyes of many the consummation of all previous thought, works on a theory of purely æsthetic submission to the art that is being valued. It is

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curious that Signor Croce, the great philosopher among critics, rules out philosophy, in the broad sense, from the critic's mind. Perhaps it is the breadth of his philosophical apprehension of things that has enabled him to make this narrowed attitude comprehensive and self-satisfying. In the hands of a lesser man it would have degenerated into some variation or elaboration of the old 'Art for Art's sake' formula.

But I do not believe that this submission of the mind to the absolutely pure contemplation of art, felt always at lyrical intensity, is an experience of the whole critical consciousness. I think it does not really satisfy those to whom literature is the central activity of life, and contains somewhere its ultimate truths. It is the attitude of one who has other philosophies, or other aspects of his philosophy, for different sides of experience. Signor Croce's criticism still seems to me to have its limitations. I do not phrase this ironically, for I know there are many to whom it is virtually absolute. I think it may be nearly perfect within these limitations; but the limitations affect those who would find in literature a complete attitude to life. It is from this point of view I write.

I am now launched upon a confession of faith. I think that true criticism is philosophical, since it

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must spring from a fruitful sense of values. These values are not originally artistic; they derive from other experience, perhaps chiefly moral. They acquire strength and consistency through the tremendous process of association. This sense of values is the original impulse which drives us to art; otherwise we should pass it by without inclination or understanding. Our first ideas about art are quite crude – merely actualistic, or conventionally moral, or associational, or based upon irrelevant emotions. But gradually our sense of general values becomes merged with our thoughts about art in itself. From this mental duality the critical instinct is formed. The critical faculty grows becomes rational, with widened experience and scope of comparison; it acquires a more complex and subtle plasticity to reactions.

Since literature always deals *au fond* with humanity, the theories in the light in which it should be viewed are *humanistic*. I know there is nothing new or startling in this opinion; it is older than the *Poetics*. It has been ineffectually refuted countless times. It has been expounded with every variety of incompetence and subjected to every possible sort of misunderstanding. It is identified everywhere with ‘moralistic’ criticism, and moralistic criticism is the name put

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upon every incubus and every heresy with which the path of literary thought is strewn. But the fact that nobody has found a formula for humanism is indefinitely less important than the fact that nobody has found a substitute for it. Its literary creed is probably indefinable. It lies afloat somewhere between crude anthropocentrism and pure ethics. Its relation to these two has to be adjusted instinctively.

But the validity of humanistic criticism does depend upon the existence of an ultimate identity between truth and beauty. The truth with which it is concerned is ethical, not metaphysical – for the business of letters is with humane, and not abstract or scientific thought.

Beauty, in the narrowest as in the widest sense, is the condition of literary as of all other art. No discussion of purpose or material must lead us to ignore for a moment this one essential, unquestionable fact. That the beauty achieved by representative art is moral, is at once the basic assumption and the most debatable point of the present argument. Does this unity really exist, or do the two entities simply become lost to sight by their very intangibility, in some transcendental, vague, mystical nebula? Now in the realms of clear literary thought we want neither mysticism nor, in any post-Kantian sense, transcen-

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dentalism. Yet this identity, though in no sense mystical (albeit something similar is known to mystics) is in a sense transcendent; for the ways and processes by which moral truth attains to the state of beauty, or vice-versa, do not admit of precise revelation. But I think it is very clear that criticism does not go beyond intuitions. The intuition of literary criticism is for the recognition of representation or equivalence. Do we proceed on a true intuition if we say that beauty is the æsthetic equivalent (or symbol) of moral truth?

Truth, in and beyond the fact that it is the sole reality, is a harmony. Or, rather, it is the necessary condition of harmony. If harmony does not lie wholly in the presence of truth it must depend on an absolute illusion, an illusion all-sufficing to its object. There can be no harmony, and so no beauty, where there is falsity or doubt. The illusion that is *sufficing* to the degree that it allows the presence of beauty must be more than illusory; it must exist through some truth of its own. If the illusion is to have this cogency as of truth, it must be felt as sincere, have a reality for, at any rate, one mind. For on this illusory reality the sensation of beauty depends. Beauty cannot exist in any mind unless there is present the persuasion of harmony, truth. Therefore the per-

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suasion is, even if illusory, indistinguishable from, at one with, truth – to the mind it affects. The circle is not logically complete, but the intuition which is artistic perception cannot break it. For beauty is its own truth, and truth its own beauty. And all beauty can be realized morally, and all truth realized æsthetically. The identity will not yield its secret to logic, but to intuition it is inevitable.

The recognition of this identity (the word is not used in a precisely literal sense but in the sense of an inherent, indivisible unity) is in no way mystical, it will come through plain questioning. Those to whom scepticism is a pleasure will always deny it.

The morality of art is not the whole case for humanistic criticism. Morality, though *always* an abstract value, has in literature, the 'Imitation of Life,' a very wide, complex and variable scope of application. It has, obviously, to throw off every fixed or conventional standard of good or evil. It concerns the substance or material of art, not literary method nor the judgment of verbal beauty.

V: OUR IMMEDIATE LEGACY

THE 'different' poetry of the last five-and-twenty years, leaving aside its traditional and technical evolution, is obviously the reflection of the profound upheavals that have taken place in all branches of thought. It was marked from the beginning by what a contemporary critic has well called an enhanced 'technique of perception.' This is not a matter of language (our use of language has not definitely improved) but of heightened emotional and spiritual perception – induced, one may conjecture, by a more spontaneous and anxious observation.

The whole Victorian attitude has best been summed up by Mr. Chesterton as a 'compromise.' 'They laid waste the soul,' says Mr. Middleton Murry, 'and called it peace.' But the Victorian acquiescence was not shallow. It sufficed the most earnest minds of the time – except, significantly, its one great literary critic, Matthew Arnold. From its central assumptions there was almost no revolt. It did not fall to the ground between Tennyson and Browning, the Brontës and George Eliot, between Darwin or Huxley and the Anglican Church. It was simply, in all manifestations, a positive age, and there is not necessarily a spiritual gulf between positive scepticism and positive faith. For the formation of that another type of mind is needed. It was present in Thomas

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Hardy; but to him the age paid no heed. The condition of such a compromise was, that a Hardy could not breathe in it. The atmosphere that was generated, for example, by the Intellectualist Movement in Russia ; which freed a Dostoevsky and nurtured a Tchehov, is not even yet native to these shores. Wessex, after all, is to the average apprehension a fairyland.

I do not presume to outline a much-needed chapter in the history either of the poetry or of the social consciousness of England. But the necessity of each includes the necessity of the other. The interaction at all points is evident, and, as I have tried to show, the environment in which literature is produced is not really a primarily artistic one.

One might say alternatively of the Victorians that they made a certitude and called *that* peace. The certitude took numerous, different, and sometimes quite antagonistic forms with them; but they never doubted its validity. Their poverty was not chiefly spiritual, but philosophical. The deficiency was of inquiry rather than of feeling. That sounds a little obvious, but it has a direct reference to poetry. A poet's ultimate need is confidence, surety; but it must be self-attained. You cannot write cogently out of other people's convictions.

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When the gleam had departed from the last phase of pure nineteenth-century romanticism with the youth of Tennyson, the passion of Swinburne, the individuality of Rosetti, the later-found uniqueness of Dobell and Alexander Smith, it left behind a convention, Browning who stood only three parts outside the convention, and a barrenness which was not fully apparent until long afterwards. The more durable freshness of Browning lay in the fact that, unlike any other of our great modern poets before Mr. Hardy, he was fundamentally a poet of love. And his conception of love, if characteristically positive, was in no respect narrow or limited; his awareness of the passion was of the same *order* as Shakespeare's or Mr. Hardy's. His curious, robust evasion of the poignancy of life in many other aspects never impeded his surrender to this one of the great impulses of art; though his frequent insensibility in other experiences kept him from *sustaining* any of his work at the supreme heights. The palpable absurdity of making 'God's in his heaven, all's right with the world' the chorus of a bitter play does not prevent the scene between Sebald and Ottima in *Pippa Passes* from being one of the strongest and truest things in modern poetic drama. For love, from the absolute standpoint of romantic literature, is affected

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less than any other motive by Time or the changes of thought, strange faces or other minds. It leaves Browning as modern as Mr. Gordon Bottomley and as old as Æschylus. His

‘O lyric love, half-angel and half-bird,
And all a wonder and a wild desire.’

has a timeless appeal; while

‘One who never doubted clouds would break.’
has become the word of an idiosyncrasy, perhaps a deplorable one, it is among the curiosities of a kind of Victorian temperament, to be studiously thought about by historians. This is liable to be the fate of all expressions of semi-religious faith through poetry. They are imprisoned for ever in a personality and a decade.

How far we are from any Victorian idea; yet how inadequate, perhaps, to the future; as we shudder to the despair that is behind the resignation of M. Jules Romains’ ‘Europe’ –

‘Nous avons cru en trop de choses
Nous, les hommes de peu de foi.
Nous avons espéré trop loin
Nous, les hommes de peu d’espoir.’

It is the cry of a shattered civilization. The faith and hope of the Victorians never failed, because they

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never questioned anything fundamental. This gives another instance of the illusion that has the same effect as truth. But we cannot return to the bliss of our fathers' illusions.

The civilization of the last century *is* shattered, all the same. The hand of the Lord is heavy upon Israel; if there is any peace still it has gone out among the Philistines. There is now, *commun a toute personne bien née*, a feeling of utter chaos in moral values. Poetry, before the war, but more especially since, does naturally exhibit, however ineffectually, a passionate concern with the soul. The pity is that this reflection of the dominant seriousness of the age is mainly negative. The fault lies firstly, perhaps, in the overstrained sense of uniqueness that obsesses each mind in feeling so much that is unprecedented. A soul that is conscious of little beyond its own unrelated experience cannot mirror the general reality.

A feeling of security might appear to be what the creative mind is most in need of to-day. But, where all is doubt, the mind cannot build this needed serenity save upon its own creation. How is a valuable standpoint to be achieved? An attitude like that of the young Tennyson, which proceeded not from mental originality, or the exercise of the whole intellect, nor from creative penetration into things —

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but from a natural sensuous receptivity 'taking in' perceptions and embodying them consummately in a new way incidental to genius, will not carry a poet over the problems of an age such as ours. *Roma fuit*. We no longer dwell complacently in a great capital; we are wanderers, some stagnating in unfertile valleys, some struggling vainly towards the bleakest pinnacles of thought, seeking a Pisgah view of a land where the soul may yet find rest and fruition.

VI: UNEXAMINED LIFE

“ο δ’ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ.”

ASSUME, then, that the earnest contemporary poet seeks an attitude, that shall be something more than another compromise, to the spiritual problems that beset him. Indeed, the age of serious compromises is over. The poet must look for something that lies through and beyond contentment and disquiet. It will be a serenity before which joy and sorrow, doubt and conviction, are merged and transcended. Even if, to the keen spirit, there can be no serenity in life, there is a way of serenity in art. That is the way of salvation for the devout. So modern poetry is a matter by itself; a separate and ceaseless concern to the literary humanist.

What message has the poetic voice of to-day to those for whom literature is not an after-dinner recreation or a pleasing exercise of the mind, but the complement and consummation of life? Very little; we are of a generation which has maybe striven greatly but has not achieved. Nobody, to be sure, can reproach us with this; what is left of the older generation (with one great exception) may have been sufficient to itself; it is little enough now. *Our* teeth are on edge; it is we who suffer the awakening from a long complacency. Mr. Hardy, indeed, was awake

all the time, and he is with us still; he is of all the generations.

But what has Mr. Doughty, Mr. Kipling or Mr. Masfield done to explore the gulf that has opened (or revealed itself) beneath our feet in these last ten years? Mr. Doughty is an aged man; we must surmise from the parody of his high purpose in 'Man-soul' that the shock of an agonizing civilization has reached his ears only as a dim and distorted echo. He never was of his own age; but we should have liked a better reason to hope that he is of all Time. A critic in the nineteen-twenties dares not say whether Mr. Kipling ever was a serious poet; one can only say with conviction that he is one no longer. His departure is a cause for regret, for he had a technical efficiency and an *unforced* individuality that are all too rare now.

And the author of 'The Everlasting Mercy'? He inclines, at any rate in his later lyrical work, to the statement rather than the realization of personal emotion, and he is of interest to the critic more in his relation to the poetical limitations of the present day than in his relation to the *Zeitgeist*. The insubstantiality of method which he shares with the negative traditions of the Georgians, has induced in him a cloudiness of poetic thought which has gravely

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inhibited his whole contemplation of things. His grasp has decidedly weakened. The sincere prose of 'The Old Front-Line' reveals a shallowness and conventionality, not indeed of feeling, but of perception. His accommodation to the standpoint of the crowd is a little evident throughout. The worst point about this, for literature, is that the accommodation is unconscious.

For Mr. Masefield the prose-writer and Mr. Masefield the poet are one. There is no cleft in his creative idea. But 'The War and the Future' is not much to the purpose. Still less so 'Reynard the Fox' and 'Right Royal,' which are vigorous but on the whole ineffectual works, and certainly bear no significance for the serious issues of the time. (That is, needless to say, only the judgment of one particular standpoint.) Most remarkable in these poems is the way in which they contrast the best and the worst in Mr. Masefield. The worst need not detain us; the best gives glimpses of Mr. Masefield's refuge from vexation of mind in abandonment to the abiding sweetness of the English countryside. There is a good deal of sentimentality as well as sweetness in Mr. Masefield's expression of this motive — again, largely because he has so little technical readiness to save him — and he gives the impression of one who has

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been content to forget real experience in a minor solace.

The lyrics of the 'Enslaved' volume are touched more often with flashes of beauty, but they are none the less the work of one who finds writing too easy. Nothing conduces more readily to a weak fluency than does a third-rate method. That is why the typical modern poet is so disturbingly prolific. If the quality and appropriateness of the symbol are left out of account one can get on *stating* ideas and emotions all the time. Mr. Masfield is not an extreme case; he knows pretty well what beauty is; he has a vague unity still in view,

'a sense
Of life so lovely and intense,
It lingers when we wander hence.'

The poet is here, but the unity even of this minor conception of an attitude is never quite sustained. His penetration, in truth, is not *creative*. There is a hiatus between observation or experience and artistic expression. The deficiencies are various; but the most important one is of language. For language is a condition of consciousness; we think in verbal terms.

Mr. Masfield has the vision of a true poet; but he is an ultra Romantic; he is too easily satisfied, and the

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influence of his technique, thence of his attitude and finally of his manner of contemplation is responsible for much that is ineffectual in his younger admirers. If I seem to have dragged this criticism in arbitrarily while I should have been speaking of his relation to the more profound problems of modern consciousness, I plead that these other considerations touch the root cause of his inadequacy to represent his age.

No, the heightened perception of this century has descended to the state of a valueless fluency in many of our older poets; and the complicated emotional issues of these last few years of awakening have driven them merely to seek their beauty in evasive and shallower channels — often *culs-de-sac*. This conclusion may sound harsh; but there seems to be no escaping it. It would be unjust to apply it universally; to the very old, for instance, or to those who, like the Poet Laureate, have long since found that they achieve their noblest expression by keeping a little apart from life in the aspects of its contemporary flux and change. In this company should be included, I think, Dr. J. W. Mackail, whose restrained and scholarly aloofness suggests adherence to a necessarily weakening convention of reflective verse traceable back to Matthew Arnold. On the other hand, the occasional poetry which is the *parer-*

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gon of minds of naturally comprehensive and epic mould, such as that of Mr. Eden Phillpotts, has come lately to have a relatively higher significance for us.

Mr. Laurence Binyon has attracted wide attention in a rôle which has perhaps surprised himself, that of a poet of the war. I bring him into this discussion solely in this particular respect. I do not know that it represents his best work. He has never been a poet of outstanding pretensions. But his 'fine-won sincerity,' to quote Mr. William Orton, enforced with a lofty distinction of style (in the narrower sense) has made a deep appeal to something worthy in the mind of the English people.

'Solemn the drums thrill: Death august and royal
Sings sorrow up into immortal spheres.
There is music in the midst of desolation
And a glory that shines upon our tears.'

But the truth of this great theme must be sought in deeper wells; poetry attains to high significance when it moves in subtler and less obvious relation to the actualities of its subject; when it re-creates that subject from the fresh view-point of genius; passes beyond embellishment to embodiment.

VII: THE WAR AND WILFRED OWEN

AN actual upheaval, as the European War, does not become at once a consistent reality to every sensitive mind, but is responded to in countless erratic ways as an individual experience. Occurrence takes a long time to alter general consciousness, and that consciousness takes a long time to alter the language of 'power.'

Literature, it is almost axiomatic, reflects not the present but the past, more or less remote according to the degree of 'genius' that is at work. Rupert Brooke, the early laureate of the War, was a man of some genius; but he might be definitely classified as a transcendentalist and not a realist. He had not the innate vision of the mystic; but his particular exaltation of thought and feeling tended to express itself with a quasi-mystical esotericism and fervour. His popularity, under normal circumstances, would have been remarkable. But we must remember that his early, and quite representative, poetry was scarcely heard beyond coteries, where his personality must have counted for a good deal. He was the fine flower of a type of young Englishman which these last few years have seen pass to rise no more. We may be sure the reputation he achieved after his death is of the kind he would have most abhorred. His poetry happened to embody an attitude of mind, difficult now to disentangle from the flowers of theatricality

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and false emotionalism which have clustered about it. Brooke had no very great depth of originality or distinction of thought; but he had the soul of a good man and a poet, and the gift of relating everything he saw to that individual and essentially youthful standpoint which is the most remarkable feature of his work. It is illustrated in his study of Webster even more clearly than in his poetry.

'Avec des citations bien prises on trouverait dans chaque auteur son propre jugement.' It may seem rather uncharitable to quote his earliest poem 'Second Best', but it has often been rapturously cited by others, and it gives a fair illustration of the popular quality of his thought, the way in which his genius intensified and raised it to something that is uncommon poetry, and the vicious technical influences that had laid hold of him from the beginning.

'And has the truth brought no new hope at all,
Heart, that you're weeping still for Paradise?
Do they still whisper, the old weary cries?
"Mid youth and song, feasting and carnival,
Through laughter, through the roses, as of old
Comes Death, on shadowy and relentless feet,
Death, unappeasable by prayer or gold;
Death is the end, the end!"
Proud, then, clear-eyed and laughing, go to greet
Death as a friend!

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Exile of immortality, strongly wise,
Strain through the dark with undesirous eyes
To what may lie beyond it. Sets your star,
O heart, for ever. Yet, behind the night
Waits for the great unborn, somewhere afar,
Some white tremendous daybreak. And the light,
Returning, shall give back the golden hours,
Ocean a windless level, Earth a lawn
Spacious and full of sunlit dancing-places,
And laughter, and music, and, among the flowers,
The gay child-hearts of men and the child-faces,
O heart, in the great dawn!

'new hope at all,' 'old weary cries,' 'the end, the end,'
'clear eyed and laughing,' 'some white tremendous
daybreak,' 'golden hours,' 'the gay child-hearts of
men,' 'the great dawn,' — in spite of all this post-
romantic diffuseness and weak emphasis one feels
that a more than usually spontaneous poet is at work.
But so trite an equipment of language and so vague a
grasp of the symbol render valuable achievement
impossible. There is almost no tangibility or control
in the expression. The poem is wildly subjective,
and is an extreme instance of the negative modern
traditionalism which we are concerned to analyse.
Another pronounced characteristic is the straining
after uniqueness and originality of emotions: great
poetry deals with the old, strong, fundamental emo-

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tions freshly realized, re-created through the new personality that relates them to other experiences in a different manner, and has the different medium that a new attitude induces.

Let us skip four or five years and see what control of form and manner could do for Brooke's style. The first sonnet (the sonnet was his best form) of 'Menelaus and Helen' feels out for beauty with the deliberate restraint of a better kind of modern lyric; in style he never surpassed it save in the wonderful sestet of 'The Dead.'

'Hot through Troy's ruin Menelaus broke
To Priam's palace, sword in hand, to sate
On that adulterous whore a ten years' hate
And a king's honour. Through red death, and smoke,
And cries, and then by quieter ways he strode,
Till the still innermost chamber fronted him.
He swung his sword, and crashed into the dim
Luxurious bower, flaming like a god.
High sat white Helen, lonely and serene.
He had not remembered that she was so fair,
And that her neck curved down in such a way;
And he felt tired. He flung the sword away,
And kissed her feet, and knelt before her there
The perfect Knight before the perfect Queen.'

Except for one or two obvious redundancies, the lines are almost perfect of their own slight order.

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They are patently by Rupert Brooke, nobody else could have written them; the limitations are of him and of his age. 'Their individuality is that of 'genius.' The opening of the sestet conveys the impression of 'inevitability,' and has the quality of style which is the condition of that impression. A purely romantic form has achieved language sufficient to its content. The content, to be sure, is not very important.

Now let us place beside this a passage from one of his best known poems, written about the same time, in which the meaning is a more serious factor, but the form is loose. Having something to say, Brooke can only say it with the aid of his old licence. Characteristic and inspired in ideas, (nothing could illustrate better than this poem what has been said of the transcendental nature of his vision and the perverseness of his popular esteem) he now sinks from artistically formed expression to what is little more than formless impressionism.

 '. . . I, too,
Laughing and looking, one of all,
I watched the quivering lamplight fall
On plate and flowers and falling tea
And cup and cloth; and they and we
Flung all the dancing moment by
With jest and glitter. . . .

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'Till suddenly, and otherwhence,
I looked upon your innocence.
For lifted clear and still and strange
From the dark woven flow of change,
Under a vast and starless sky
I saw the immortal moment lie.

'One instant, I, and instant, knew
As God knows all. And it and you,
I, above Time, oh, blind! could see
In witless immortality,
I saw the marble cup; the tea,
Hung in the air, an amber stream;
I saw the fire's unglittering gleam . . .
Light was more alive than you.

'For suddenly, and otherwhence,
I looked on your magnificence.
I saw the stillness and the light,
And you, august, immortal, white,
Holy and strange; and every glint
Posture and jest and thought and tint
Freed from the mask of transiency,
Triumphant in eternity,
Immote, immortal.'

In all seriousness 'Dining Room Tea' is a flash of vision fine enough for the greatest poetry. It has a significance utterly beyond the skilful accomplishment of 'Menelaus and Helen.' But surely inspiration never flowed into worse channels. Three words are used where Marvell would have used one. The

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poet would not 'watch' the lamplight falling without 'looking'; nor do we need to be told that lamplight 'quivers' under these circumstances; it is in suggestion, not statement, of an obvious association that the strength of poetry lies. Is 'look upon' a sufficiently dynamic verb to follow 'suddenly' and a break in the verse? Is 'otherwhence' a graceful or normal word, and does it really rhyme with magnificence? Everybody allows a young poet to be fantastic and unexpected; we bear in mind the 'element of surprise' that Coleridge demands of poetry; but look at 'and strange' after 'clear and still,' in this context. It is not in a logical sequence of vision or emotion. It is a surrender to rhyme and a trick of speech; it half contradicts and half contorts the two previous adjectives. Why 'vast and starless sky'? Is not the sky always vast and is not the impression of its vastness augmented rather by starfullness than by starlessness? But the worst feature here is the climax that rhymes 'lie,' which has a very dubious right to exist at all, with 'sky,' and totally diverts the required poetic concentration upon 'immortal moment.'

The fine phrase, almost Dantesque in its crispness, 'As God knows all' is hampered by the vagueness and redundancy (not a convincing emotional hesitance) of the preceding line. What does 'witless'

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mean here? Why tell us that the tea, hung in the air, is an amber stream; it must be an amber stream, the evocation of an image suffices without its statement, and if it is a stream, conversely, it must be 'hung' in the air! 'Unglittering gleam' is a hideous piece of internal alliteration.

The arresting line, 'Light was more alive than you,' is in reality on a level with the remark of the young lady who wished that she had as much money as her fiancé could play chess. To see the stillness and the light is to see a negative and a positive thing together: to see a person august, immortal and white all at once is to see what is abstract and only admissible poetically in the middle of what is concrete. Is 'transiency' two lines further on, a mask by any possible licence of fancy or expression? And 'immote!'

This rigorous application of technical criticism is very distasteful; but I wish to show that I have not spoken at random about the characteristic vices of modern poetic style; here, perhaps, *in excelsis*. Even more important is to show that what the large body of persons that enjoys these lines appreciates is not their poetry, but some other property. Probably it is emotion: the feelings the reader would himself like to experience, suggested more subtly. But the condition of mind is not communicated to the reader as a

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revelation; it results simply from a pleasant release on his own sentiment, and these sentiments (here is the defect) need not be of one particular kind, do not arise inevitably out of the poetry. For despite an almost frenzied vigour of imagery, the symbolic revelation effected by 'Dining-Room Tea' is negligible. That would not matter if its many readers were awake to the difference in quality between this and the sestet of 'The Dead'; but they are not. Rupert Brooke the temperament may be as pleasing as Rupert Brooke the poet; but it points a grave limitation in the understanding of serious modern poetry that their relative importance is capable of inversion.

I have spoken to the poetry of Wilfred Owen as being prophetic rather than contemporary in the influences of its strange, prophetic apprehension of pain; so its technique is really the only factor relevant to the argument of this book. It happens to contrast strikingly with that of the poet just examined. But it is impossible in Owen's case to think of the unique manner apart from the unique matter, and to pass this by seems unnatural. To Owen the attainment of verbal beauty was not a conscious aspiration, and but faintly a subconscious one. The things he wrote were not meant to be lovely. In the haunting words of the fragmentary Preface found among his papers:

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'Above all, this book is not concerned with Poetry.
The subject of it is War, and the pity of War.
The poetry is in the pity.
Yet these elegies are not to this generation,
This is in no sense consolatory.

'They may be to the next . . .
That is why the true poets must be truthful.'

In pursuit of these ends he wrote much that is sheer aching constation of the intolerable horrors he had known. His real achievement has come to us in the space of less than 200 lines, some of them almost isolated. His language has power; but the power of its strong, troubled, challenging overtones is greater. 'Strange Meeting,' metrically an experiment in blank-verse welded by assonance and dissonance, is the greatest very short poem written in our language in modern years. Poets are prophets too in their fashion; but of Hardy and Owen alone in our day is the spiritual apprehension deep enough to make their fashion compulsive and unquestionable to a critical generation that demands much. Owen's literary nature is nurtured in that deepest realization of all, which Keats took from the shade of Moneta:

'None shall usurp that height . . .
Save those to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery, and will not let them rest.'

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He is, in his own words, a pitcher filled

‘Even from wells we sunk too deep for war.’

‘Even as one who bled where no wounds were.’

Steeped in this pure poetical awareness that is too deep for earthly broils to shake, where no blood flows but from the essentialized ‘miseries of the world,’ where blood is even as the ‘tears in things,’ he surveys war and the pity of war with eyes that have known the calm light of ultimate serenity. The accidental becomes the universal: the quality of every perception in ‘Strange Meeting,’ whether superficially it be consolatory or grievous, derives from that unchanging core of human reality where solace and grief are at one:

‘Whatever hope is yours,

Was my life also; I went hunting wild

After the wildest beauty in the world,

Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,

But mocks the steady running of the hour,

And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.

For by my glee might many men have laughed,

And of my weeping something has been left,

Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,

The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

Now men will go content with what we spoiled,

Or, discontent, boil bloody and be spilled.

They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,

None will break ranks, though nations trek from
progress.

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Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery;
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then when much blood had clogged their chariot
wheels
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.'

The mysterious intensity of impulse (always distinct, as in the greatest poetry, from actual mysticism) with which the various elements of an inward creative harmony find each their strong concrete expression in language; to attain harmony of impression beyond the conflicting perceptions which have to be absorbed, suffused and re-created by their fitting verbal equivalence; may be felt in a less transcendental working in 'Greater Love,' where the poetic apprehension is more directly referable to an earthly theme and still intensifies and exalts that theme by the serenity of the unshakeable spirit behind.

'Red lips are not so red
As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.
Kindness of wooed and wooer
Seems shame to their love pure.

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O Love, your eyes lose lure
When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

‘Your voice sings not so soft –
Though even as wind murmuring through rafters
loft –

Your dear voice is not dear,
Gentle, and evening clear,
And theirs whom none now hear . . .
And though your hand be pale,
Paler are all which trail
Your cross through flame and hail:
Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.’

When we come upon such an achievement as this in contemporary poetry, its style is necessarily a question of great importance to the study of modern literature generally. To what extent are the words Owen uses, and his method of assembling them, conventional and in general use among poets of to-day?

Firstly his use of assonance between the end words of each pair of lines in ‘Strange Meeting’ (they hardly admit of being called couplets) casts more emphasis upon these words than is entailed by blank-verse; as much, indeed, as when rhymes are employed. The last word in each line becomes most important poetically as well as rhythmically. In nearly every case they are simple and forcible words, chosen apparently for that reason. Further, they are

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mostly 'poetical' words; words whose physical meaning is capable of taking a concentrated æsthetic significance, and which are admissible in a passage of sheer verbal beauty – wild, world, hair, hour, untold, tigress, mystery, wells, war. But – more important – are they weighty in these lines chiefly for their physical or direct descriptive power, as in the older traditions of English poetry; or for their power of vague suggestion, their emotional aura, their mysterious nebula, their associative glamour as in some modern romantics, Mr. Yeats notably, and those who follow the looser 'Pre-Raphaelites'? It is a point central to all study of language.

It seems that the function of the particular words instanced is rather a denotation than an implication, and when they are used metaphorically or to illustrate a generalized quality ('swiftness of the tigress') they are chosen as the simplest and most direct symbols available. But that does not dispose of the whole problem.

In his essay on Edgar Allen Poe Mr. Arthur Ran-
some puts forward the theory that words have two functions: the kinetic and the potential. This, of course, recalls the older division of the literature of knowledge and the literature of power. But the analysis is pushed farther back; it is a division *within* the language of power, since the other is inadequate to

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the uses of imaginative creation. Mr. Ransome's illustrations of the limits of the kinetic are not quite satisfying; but his elucidation of the 'potential' energy in words is a thing to be remembered. What I wish to carry away from it in the present connection is, that words may be used such as those of Owen quoted, without the aim or effect of evoking any vague nebula beyond their proper meaning, yet with a power beyond mere denotation. I would define this as an *associative* force, inherent in certain words – they will be, of course, what I call 'poetical' words. Now most of the stressed words in Owen's 'Strange Meeting' have a force of appeal, or emotional and æsthetic evocation, derived from their familiarity in poetry and passionate speech; they contain in them some accumulation of previous experience in all conceivable readers, they are *intensified* words. This precise specification may appear hair-splitting; but if it is of such words we feel that they give all great poetry its vitality of expression, how vastly they differ from the 'kinetic' words that must suffice to do most of the work in ordinary writing, and the hazy words that by virtue of their haziness form the effective element of a kind, not necessarily an unworthy kind, of romantic poetry!

The poetic inadequacy of words that merely state

can be well studied in those passages of Wordsworth where he has endeavoured to apply his well-known critical heresy in practice; the work of the modern 'realists,' too, is eloquent of this mistaken conception of the relation between the function of words in statement and in the language of 'power.'

It can hardly be necessary to insist that poetry needs not merely a different vocabulary from that of prose; but a different instinct in selecting from it. Words, in prose, are used to convey a meaning as well as possible; in poetry the more important words first evoked by a vague connection with the meaning, themselves condition the meaning when it is poetically realized. For poetry makes 'meaning' in a more profound sense than meaning makes poetry. To put it more clearly: poetry only has its power, that is, only exists, by virtue of 'intensified' words such as those instanced above; instincts — or common sense — indicates what words can bear poetical significance, and the other words are merely conjunctive. A group of such conjunctive words cannot make a poetical phrase; though it may by reference to external circumstances produce æsthetic effect in *dramatic* poetry as Lear's 'the feather stirs,' a mere statement which has æsthetic power through facts extrinsic both to itself and to language.

VIII: A. E. HOUSMAN

THE author of *The Shropshire Lad* has recently issued, after an interval of twenty-six years, his second and final collection of poetry under the title *Last Poems*. Professor Housman is a poet of large utterance, and he has an emotional intensity, finely controlled, which scarcely three of his contemporaries have surpassed. He has thought fit to create, he declares, only at moments of keen personal experience. *The Shropshire Lad* was a first fine careless rapture which he does not hope to renew. But the quality of these few later pieces is unchanged. He is the poet of a *genre*; he has therefore a vicarious method of self-realization which gives him a more *objective* power.

Many of the greatest works of English fiction have made their material of human passions set in the atmosphere of primitive, elemental life; which has its control from within and not from social environment and custom. Of such nature are *Wuthering Heights*, *Adam Bede* and the great Wessex novels. The most sophisticated and deeply cultured minds agree that an unrestrained setting gives the freest scope for an epic realization of life. It is part of a limitation in Thackeray and Henry James that such a transposition of the creatures of their imagination was impossible to them. They had each to work in those aspects of life most familiar and natural to their contemplation.

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But poetry does not show the same lesson. It must work at higher pressure; be more economical, seek a more rarefied theme. It has not so much leisure and licence in manipulation. A subtle, complicated and leisurely poetry is fraught with danger. It is difficult, in the lyric at any rate, to transpose, to dramatize, the compulsive emotion. Lyrics of a translunary type, such as Shelley's, have to be considered as subjective, judged in the light of that limitation. If one takes the primitive, rustic setting, as does Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie in *The End of the World*, one gives a particular purpose freedom; but one sacrifices much of the purely lyrical, individual ecstasy. This must not be taken to suggest that Mr. Abercrombie's work is the less valuable; he is a dramatic poet, but having Mr. Housman in mind the question is how far *he* can succeed, and has indeed succeeded, in giving his lyrical genius play in work that is not in the least like, in substance, the ruminations of an austere-minded scholar.

The most remarkable thing to be noticed about Mr. Housman is that when he wrote *The Shropshire Lad* he was rather ahead of his age; to-day, in producing poetry of a similar nature, he is a little in the wake of things; but he is also *nearer* to the general thinking mind than he was in the 'nineties. In other

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words, his natural vision has a prophetic quality. Bearing this in mind, let us examine more particular points: the literary method and the peculiar transposition of attitude that distinguish him.

Take first *The Shropshire Lad*, since it is pure *genre* poetry; consider how far it is personative and how far subjective, personal. All the themes are elemental. All the language is that in everyday use. The emotional attitude is so untouched with the subtleties of culture that we must suppose it is deliberately simplified. This means that the poet first imposes on himself a restraint akin to that involved in the use of dramatic structure; though not actually dramatic.

Once more, let us remember: the greatest poetry does not need complex emotions. The thoughts of the Shropshire lad are not the thoughts, even by poetic licence, of an ordinary peasant; they are the thoughts of a poet whom one pretends to have the upbringing and outlook of a country boy. So the rustic, elemental world that is the subject of contemplation is viewed, in consistency, as a world complete in itself. There is no adjustment, no relation to the exterior, wider realities of the universe of educated apprehension. The Shropshire which Mr. Housman's poems apprehend is as the Warwickshire seen by Adam Bede — indeed, a less educated Adam

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Bede; not Warwickshire seen by George Eliot. The Shropshire lad speaks of things as he feels them: Mr. Housman does not stand behind him to tell us how else they might have been felt.

This is an uncommon thing in modern literature: the lowly protagonist recounting a tale in the first person is not familiar in recent fiction, and under older traditions he was never free from the interpositions of his creator. If Emily Brontë had let Hareton Earnshaw narrate *Wuthering Heights* – as she might very well have done – the narrative would have been full of Emily Brontë: the personative sense as then conceived would soon have proved inadequate. Mr. Housman, as a poet, is quite unique in this respect; he can make his countryman give us back any experience without a trace of inconsistency. In qualification it may be said that the Shropshire lad is not a detached creation but the embodiment of Mr. Housman's own temperament at a lower range of culture and experience. But that does not affect the achievement; is probably, rather, a condition of it; making the purely lyrical attitude possible.

How far – since this question must touch the quality and scope of his vision – is Mr. Housman faithful to his whole experience, and how far does he limit himself to the spiritual (as apart from the cul-

tural and social) experience possible in a peasant? Does he, under the necessity of excluding subtle experience, 'unsight the seen'? Is it possible to do so and still be a sincere poet; that is, a poet?

It is certain that very much is 'seen' by Mr. Housman that could not reasonably be brought within the expression of a rustic spokesman. But is the spiritual essence of these perceptions, apart from the intellectual setting that relates them and might be needed to symbolize them in a more sophisticated way, attributable to a simple mind?

No true poet, none who has the authenticity that is written large upon Mr. Housman's work, denies his own full, emotional experience. 'It is not possible.' But he can restrict himself in the language, the range of equivalence, through which he liberates these perceptions, and thus does he bring them into dramatic character. Sophisticated poetry – and the highest poetry must be that – is the subtle relation of simple intuitions: in simplifying poetry one symbolizes and correlates the same intuitions more slowly, as it were; shutting off from one's stock of experience derivative and allusive imagery and the more sophisticated properties of language. The poetry may be strengthened in consequence, or it may be weakened. Usually in the case of the poets who can face at all such deliberate

restriction as is needed in *genre* poetry, the quality of the poetry is deepened, because concentrated, and its range is narrowed. In view of one or two pieces in the *Last Poems*, it seems that Mr. Housman's *Shropshire Lad* had enabled him to accentuate the unity and sincerity of his thought, and has cut him off from very little that is valuable to his particular receptiveness.

The pervading note of Mr. Housman's assertion is a peculiarly barren scepticism. To this state of joyless indifference – it is neither fear nor tedium of life, but something that seems far less pregnant – every fragment of experience that he sets down, in the end returns. Towards the close of the Victorian epoch, when literature was still steeped in the habit of religious certitude, such a negation of any purpose beneath the scheme of things was wholly unfamiliar. Mr. Housman, though we may not easily recognize it to-day, did enter the literary arena in his homely Shropshire guise as the originator of a new poetical philosophy. He was apart equally from the daring, exuberant, shallow paganism of Swinburne and from the grave, profound, subtly moral atheism of Thomas Hardy. For the joy of mortal life as life he gave us only the exaltation of despair; for the earnest, questioning revolt against the witless arbitration of our destiny he substituted a brutal defiance:

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'Oh, never fear man, nought's to dread
Look not left nor right:
In all the endless road you tread
There's nothing but the night.'

'... malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man,
Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink
For fellows whom it hurts to think:
Look into the pewter pot
To see the world as the world's not. . . .
Heigho, the tale was all a lie;
The world, it was the old world yet. . . .
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,
I'd face it as a wise man would,
And train for ill and not for good.'

This particular aspect of Mr. Housman's thought does not, in the nature of things, inspire his highest poetry. More impressive, in its restraint, is his half-stoical attitude towards beauty. Mr. Housman is timorous, not of life in any aspect, but of that joy in beauty which exalts and vivifies the feelings until they become a menace. Hence the fierce refutation of that solace which the sweetness of nature and of primal things offers to the sensitive mind; his perception of sheer beauty is persistently blotted, in these earlier poems especially, by the contrasting presence of sordidness, shame and death; peace is only

admitted as a retrospect or a hopeless dream. Of that unrest which men miscall delight, Mr. Housman is entirely sceptical; joy – the adventitious bloom of life, as Aristotle saw it – is to him at best a narcotic; it is not a moral condition. The sense of moral effort may add intensity to our defiance of the injurious gods; but the fruits of goodness are dust and ashes in our mouths.

This seems like a philosophy of moral desperation; yet it is the essence of Mr. Housman that something valid does remain. It lies partly in his realization that an elusive, purposeless beauty touches such a philosophy as his more closely than rational, inherent, elevating beauty ever could. The reader is always aware of this, and it tinges every shade of emotion that is evoked, with a deeper pessimism than is induced by the gravity of Mr. Hardy or the relentless, clear-eyed fatalism of Mr. Phillpotts.

The beauty that touches Mr. Housman's verse – to define it further by a series of negations – is not sensuous and physical; nor is it personal and difficult by its nature to communicate, in the mystic's way; nor is it transcendental, abstract. Rather it is simple; flames from the clash of tragic contrast between happiness and its eternal foiling. Let us consider this in 'Bredon Hill,' the emotional poignancy of which Mr. Housman has never quite attained elsewhere:

A. E. HOUSMAN

'In summer-time on Bredon
The bells they sound so clear;
Round both the shires they ring them
In steeples far and near,
A happy noise to hear.'

Unpretentious, almost naïve, notable for its felicitous rhythm and its brevity; yet hinting to the expert in Housman a vague disquiet.

'Here of a Sunday morning,
My love and I would lie,
And watch the coloured counties,
And hear the larks so high
About us in the sky.'

One notices chiefly the indefinable aptness of 'coloured' counties and the pregnant simpleness of 'so high.'

'The bells would ring to call her
In valleys miles away;
"Come all to church, good people;
Good people, come and pray."
But here my love would stay.'

The last line is a complete and perfect symbol; instantaneously and without seeming effort of the poet we are wrapt in the sense of a peace untouched by mundane stress or religious despondency; the sufficiency of love is epitomized, with no forethought or afterthought.

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These bells will peal upon our wedding, he would say, and we will come to church in time. Quietly, yet with ghastly inevitability, there follows on the note of tragedy; untrammelled with wider implications but revealing in the way of true poetry a universal quality in life.

‘But when the snows at Christmas
On Bredon top were strown,
My love rose up so early
And stole out unbeknown
And went to church alone. . . .
And would not wait for me. . . .

‘The bells they sound on Bredon
And still the steeples hum,
“Come all to church, good people,”
Oh, noisy bells, be dumb;
I hear you, I will come.’

‘Per ardua ad astra.’ The ardours are those supreme ones of restraint in feeling and language; the stars illumine no uncharted heavens of abstract beauty but the grim realities of terrestrial experience. It is only one way of revelation; yet perhaps it is the surest, certainly it is one of which our age stands greatly in need. Mr. Housman has not the sustained breadth of comprehension that makes the great poet; to set against this he makes no attempt, seemingly does not desire, to write ‘out of Time’ – or to escape

from his own place in Time. There is in his work no negative quality, no vain revulsion of spirit; in his language no superfluity, no lack of discipline and self-sufficiency. His æsthetic response to life is always direct; though a certain indiscriminateness as to what is valuable to poetry has accentuated in him a limitation best described as an occasional, local poverty of sensibility, by contrast with Mr. Hardy's all-embracing sympathy. To those who feel, with much justice, that Mr. Housman's poetry is of the earth earthy, it must be opposed that what he can presumably do best he does indeed; in this he is unlike nearly all the others, who, whatever they may attempt, do nothing.

As for the *Last Poems*, though the voice of criticism has been, for all its shrillness, rather half-hearted, there can be no question of retrogression; they are deeper, more varied, and not less spontaneous than those of *The Shropshire Lad*. In 'The West' Mr. Housman's deepest idiosyncrasy is finely and memorably revealed, and 'Hell Gate' is an experiment of novel and broadened significance. The *Last Poems*, as has already been said, are simply less of a sensation than the earlier volume, relative to a more sophisticated and sceptical atmosphere in religion and moral acquiescence.

IX: MODERNISM (I)

'Ah! Love, could thou and I with fate conspire
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
Would we not shatter it to bits, and then,
Remould it nearer to the Heart's Desire.'

FITZGERALD'S *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

'MODERNISM is not this or the last century's discovery,' says Mr. Ellis Roberts in his admirable book on Ibsen. 'All great art has something of it; for it is that in art which forces the artist to remember that art is a part of life, of ordinary life. It must not be confounded with naturalism, that quite arbitrarily rejected one set of symbols for another; for instance in the case of Huysmans, who insisted on the beauty of decaying matter as against the beauty of life. It is rather a belief that there is no need for the artist, when he desires to secure a beautiful result, to manipulate life in such a way that the reader should be conscious, either pleasantly or otherwise, that what he is witnessing is something exceptional. . . . Modernism is, then, the foe of exclusion, though it is the friend of selection; it proceeds by way of synthesis rather than analysis, and can claim for art a larger kingdom than was ruled by the classic or romantic sceptre. It is here that we find so close a connection between life and art. The classical artist will be concerned with form, and the

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romantic with an aspect of life, seen in terms of art; but the modernist's primary concern is not with art at all, or not at least with art in the narrower sense. He will never be tempted to regard humanity in the mass as of less importance than learning and culture; he will always, if he be a creative artist, have more interest in the semi-independent lives of his characters than in the fact of their original dependence on him. . . .'

Such an isolation of the 'modernistic' aspect of art is very valuable; though it could be well maintained that *no* true artist is concerned with art in the narrower sense, and that modernism is rather a varying property of romantic and classical literature than a separate kind. Art is, strictly, not a part of, but the complement of life; the intimacy of their connection depends upon the degree of self-revelation and self-abandonment to experience in the artist, and is therefore generally greater in romantic art than in classical. Mr. Roberts' suggestion that modernism tends to rule out the feeling of 'something exceptional' contravenes in a sense Aristotle's definition of Tragedy; but in another sense is in harmony with its later interpretation.

Carried to its logical extremity, the ruling-out of the exceptional would come to sound like the battle-cry of the 'actualists,' who do, in fact, proceed by

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analysis rather than synthesis, and will never proceed anywhere in art. However, all that is needed to avoid this is a closer examination of what is meant by 'exceptional.' A comparison of the 'exceptionality,' say, of Sophocles' tragic protagonists as dealt with by Aristotle, that generated in Jonson's comedy by his theory of 'humours,' and that attained by the curious analyst of neuropathy to whom we are growing so well accustomed, would be of service here.

One is tempted to dismiss the last-named manifestation as having no significance to literary art. Yet it is a genuine, perhaps unavoidable, product of our age. The dealer in such themes will certainly march under the 'modernistic' banner; yet he obviously directs our attention to something exceptional. His plea would be that his treatment is quite natural; the facts of existence to which he points us are in themselves strange.

It cannot too often be insisted that great art does not call for novel or remarkable material; it needs a serene and sensitive awareness of those significant emotional and intellectual experiences that are the same through all the ages. But they have to be represented in new ways to suit new generations of thought; to be shown to 'modern' eyes in a way that takes count of modern receptivity, and, incidentally, to find expression in an ever-changing language.

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As an instance of the abnormal handled in modern literature, one may take the attitude to a central aspect of life in the hero of Mr. J. D. Beresford's *God's Counterpoint*. Mr. Beresford is an almost aggressively sane writer; yet here he leaves an unhealthy impression, a bad taste in the mouth.

The motive of *God's Counterpoint* would probably be described as psychological. So is that of *Hamlet*; so to some extent that of *Œdipus Tyrannus*. That the actual experiences of Mr. Beresford's protagonist are less exceptional than those of *Œdipus* or *Hamlet* is due to a refinement of modern technique; nowadays the serious artist has not to provide so much 'action.' The structural demands of the older conventions of Tragedy are, in fact, like most artistic conventions, more a strength than an obstacle; but that consideration may be passed over, since Dostoevsky and Mr. Hardy surmounted it, and we are here using a particular for a general argument.

Why does Mr. Beresford leave an impression which is, in comparison with that of Sophocles or Shakespeare, disgusting rather than purifying; causing a physical revulsion instead of a *katharsis* of pity and dread? His values must be wrong. *God's Counterpoint* is obviously not a thing of beauty as a great tragedy is. That may be simply because Mr.

Beresford is not a poet. But the novel has not spirituality, moving us as the modernistic impulse to perpetuate the agonies of the human soul moves us in *The Possessed* and *Jude the Obscure*, which were certainly not written out of what are usually called 'poetical' motives.

The reason is that the author of *God's Counterpoint* — and hundreds of his contemporaries go with him — forgot that the artist is concerned, not with the surface facts of life, but with the realities that lie behind them. Facts, incidents, are the machinery of a writer; beauty is the stuff of his valid creation. Beauty is to be found not *in* everything but *through* everything. A relation has to be effected between the accidental and the essentiality from which, or in spite of which, it proceeds. Mr. Beresford's hero suffers because he differs in a vital respect from the psychological norm of nature; his abnormality is exhibited and analysed as under a microscope. We are moved to physical compassion, which is our business in life and not in books; our souls are not touched and desolated with flashes of the outraged beauty of things. It is the persistent contrast between the ideal of moral beauty and the cruelty of its foiling that lifts the suffering of a Raskolnikoff or a Sue Bridehead from the sphere of horror to the

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atmosphere of timeless purification and compassion that is Tragedy.

The values of modern psychological literature are unquestionably romantic rather than classical; they spring from the wish to 'Remould it nearer to the Heart's Desire' – or so reveal 'it' – that inspires Shakespeare's comedy and whose absence is the quality of Molière's. It could not be maintained that Mr. Beresford's book aims at a complete and balanced picture of life, a 'relativity of values.' So far as it makes its motive – every book has one – articulate, it is a kind of subdued protest; a protest against the clash between life and one ill-equipped for an inescapable phase of life. Something exceptional is assumed, something more serious than a Jonsonian 'humour' and with nothing of the 'illustrious' exceptionality of a Thyestes as observed by Aristotle in his study of Tragedy. Now Jonson was a classicist in that he did not seek through an individual to reveal a universal quality of things. His comic 'protagonists' – improperly so called – were a factor in a varied presentation of life; not the vehicle of epic ideas. Volpone's inhibition (if the language of current psychology does not sound incongruous in such a connection) is shown in dramatic relation to his *material* fate and to the other characters of the play,

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not to human destiny in its universal bearings. It is not a romantic theme; it is only 'modernist' of its day, 'a part of life' in Mr. Ellis Roberts' phrase, in a narrow, social sense.

Modernistic literature, then, is a literature of protest; it differs fundamentally from what I try to distinguish as 'classical' art. So the strength at which our moderns aim is to conspire with Fate; to make us feel the realities of life with a new significance, and so to shape and make articulate their own attitude. They concentrate upon aspects of life which interest and goad them, and through this they imply their protest against the scheme of things. The novel is nowadays a more general vehicle of the rebellious mind than poetry or even drama; it contains more of the heart and less disgorged literary culture, less that is derivative. It is the mistake of most poets who do admit the importance of tradition to suppose that to derive largely from the masters of literature is to acquire the strength of the great literary traditions. Whereas the young poet should keep his receptiveness, his readiness for ideas, clear of what he has read, and strive to release nothing but his own ideas as they respond to experience, but to release them with that disciplined skill in *language* which is the chief value of culture in imaginative (as apart, of

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course, from critical) art. The poet tends to become, unconsciously, a critic not of life but literature. Conversely, when he writes literary criticism – a proper, though not an essential exercise for him: critics of importance are rarely the best minor poets, and had better stick to their last – he tends to write in a misplaced, semi-poetical vein. Mr. Arthur Symons, a man of considerable gifts and a modern in technique, is perhaps as good an example as one could find of this confusion between quite independent functions. Mr. T. S. Eliot contends that it is good for a critic to engage in imaginative work; since, if his creative impulse find no such liberation, it will surge up into and mar his criticism. But I think it may be answered that a real critic has clearly in mind the distinction between philosophical (his own concern) and poetical assertion, and never allows this suspect ‘fine writing’ to be more than a handmaid to his thought. As for poetry written to clear a critic’s mind of purple, it can well be dispensed with. There is a good deal of it about; enough to make any special reference invidious.

A nos moutons. One cannot escape the conclusion that fiction is more representative to-day than poetry; the reasons are pretty obvious; therefore the best contemporary novels contain something to which

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poetry should aspire, in respect of its content as apart from its form. For the form of the novel as generally practised there is little to be said; its only merit is a facility akin to the perilous fluency of the journalist, and without his discipline of brevity. But the novel is alive; it is the vehicle of significant, individual, urgent feelings about the 'sorry scheme of things' as experienced at our particular point of time. It is singularly unhampered by forerunners in the same field. Our novelists do not go gadding after trivial continental fashions, as some of their fathers did after Flaubert, and as our poets ape Gallic decadence or distort Greek simplicity or Roman 'nobility.' A negative virtue, maybe; but the novel is a reasonably *free* form; we must be grateful for this and not regret that it pays the penalty of modernity in being too free.

I think one may say that Mr. Hardy, Mr. George Moore, Mr. Joseph Conrad¹ and Mr. Eden Phillpotts are the only novelists living who have achieved a form good enough to give full significance to their 'content.' Mr. Hardy has written no fiction since the 'nineties; Mr. Moore is an Irishman; Mr. Conrad is a Pole, and Mr. Phillpotts is a classicist. It is

¹This was, of course, written before Joseph Conrad's lamented death.

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a startling reflection, and it is not easily mitigated. Must we exclude the English impulse of 'modernism' – with all the implications of its manipulation of life, in Mr. Ellis Roberts' phrase 'in such a way that the reader should not be conscious . . . that what he is witnessing is something exceptional' – from the work of these our 'chief of men'?

Mr. Phillpotts' treatment of life should be left for the discussion of classicism later on; if I am mistaken in his classicism I am mistaken in his power; for such peculiar breadth and finality as he achieves is not explainable in terms of a romantic tradition foreign to his whole method in fiction. But in poetry, since he has a slight epic undertone, he does admit an element of personal avowal into his interpretation, and one poem of very rare quality may be quoted here, as showing his deliberately objective fatalism which avoids the 'exceptional' from a different impulse, and because its quality is too uncommon to be ignored to-day.

DUST.¹

A cone of dust is dancing at the lane end,
Caught from the surface of the thirsty trackway
And dropped again, into annihilation,
By gusts from nowhere.

¹*Athenæum*, 1920.

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Upon the wheel of little whirlwind moulded,
It billows in a wreath of spiral beauty,
But swifter than the smoke of fire dislimning,
Endures no longer.

So I, intrinsical one slippery moment,
Share with my brief, grey brother at the lane end
His buffet into being, then unfettered,
A like dismissal.

Dust of the cosmos, you alone eternal,
Immutable behind a myriad garments;
Your stars grow ripe upon the boughs of heaven;
But you bate nothing.

All one to you the forms and the reforming,
The fashion of the man, or mouse, or mountain,
So order be declared and conquered chaos
Dethroned for ever.

Mr. Moore and Mr. Conrad cannot be comprised in the modernist argument; but they are not leaders, except to a small extent in style, and their difference does not affect the contention that most of the serious fiction – which is a very small proportion of the whole output – of recent years is pre-eminently given over to these essentially modern purposes.

Mr. Conrad's work is really a great deal more exotic than those who are anxious to include it indiscriminately as an ornament of our contemporary

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labours care to recognize. His difference is evidence of original creative genius, but it is not helpful to the others; he is not much concerned with the general problems, and his attitude, towards beauty in particular, is singularly remote from those who grope in the chaos of modern life for an ultimate serenity which can only be reached when ugliness and beauty and confusion are seen steadily and whole, till they merge and dissolve before the light of ultimate reality. To Mr. Conrad, his own vision of beauty suffices, and that beauty is foreign to the norm of human experience.

Mr. Moore is nearer, in his way, to the indefinable spiritual centre; but he is even less vital to it – not because of his Celtic strain; but because his realistic method is the friend of exclusion as well as of selection. For a spiritual realist he is too subjective; limits and moulds his comprehension of life too much in fitting it to his own mood of perception and presentation. To compare his work with that of Mark Rutherford is to be conscious, from the humanistic standpoint, of a narrowing, a certain retrogression, in the more brilliant modern artist. But to stress these points seems like doing Mr. Moore an injustice; to speak of his achievement in the terms of its relation to a twentieth-century

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poetical consciousness to which it is unsympathetic, is an irrelevant imposition.

Mr. Hardy, however, I think to be a true modernist of whom few if any of his successors are worthy; he has chosen to continue his intimate and profound revelation of life in the form of narrative verse instead of prose-fiction; the reason is supposed to be a personal one due to the reception of *Jude the Obscure*; but perhaps the choice need not be regretted. At any rate, it gives us an ample body of poetry whereby to measure that of his contemporaries; though we must be careful, in justice, to distinguish between Mr. Hardy's vision of things, which is essentially epic, and that of poets (like for instance his able critic Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie) who assay the *dramatic* manner of interpretation, which is in some ways more arduous.

It seems impossible to detect any change in Mr. Hardy's fundamental views since his early writings. We must suppose that he anticipated the spiritual upheavals of this century; that the renegade Victorian is *ipso facto* an impassive Georgian. His slightly conservative tendency, his seeming dislike of change, is probably temperamental rather than intellectual; there is reason to believe that, when brought face to face with the spiritual progress that

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is after all inherent in the march of Time, he is a glad believer. He might object poetically to the pulling-down of an old cottage in Wessex; but he would raise no objection if this were necessary to the eradication of man-traps – or even of bird-traps. To apply a metaphor from religion to the wider spiritual entities, he is a Broad Churchman rather than an advocate of Disestablishment. Mr. Hardy's protest, in the most suitable form, prose fiction, against the Letter that killeth the Spirit of social life in England is mainly confined to his last two great novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. These are the mighty forerunners of the 'modernistic' novel; they were written in the late 'eighties. They discard structure, though they have the 'architectonic' quality of which it is fashionable to speak in connection with Mr. Hardy's work. They are not 'heroic'; they strain to avoid the appearance of being something exceptional.

They show the motive of this avoidance very clearly. If one wishes to protest through art against an iniquity in things, one must not seem to exaggerate the iniquity in presenting it. The chief injustice that Mr. Hardy goes out to attack in 'Tess' is that the woman pays, and moreover pays trebly through the harshness of English conventions in

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sexual morality. But Mr. Hardy, though he is not always innocent of exaggeration, is here careful not to load Tess's neighbours with any 'exceptional' censoriousness; he shows that her own inborn, religious, sensitive fear of the chastity convention is in excess of its occasions, and so oppresses her.

The one really exceptional factor in the tragedy, Angel Clare's morbid fastidiousness, is carefully shown as being out of the normal. Critical opinion is divided as to whether his creator holds up Angel's abstinence to approval; but the issue hardly seems essential. Most people feel Angel to be both cold and priggish; Mr. Hardy shows how Angel, *malade de l'idéal*, perhaps, follows his own conscience all the way.

The modernist is here the foe of exclusion and the friend of selection, in Mr. Ellis Roberts' words; he deviates from the ordinary with a purpose. He is outside his protagonist, presenting him critically, while he gives the impression of being inside him. The classicist is never the latter; the wilder kind of romantic, such as Chateaubriand, is incapable of the former.

Here is the difference, in the subtle treatment of a psychological abnormality, between the modernism of Mr. Hardy and that of Mr. Beresford before

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referred to. Angel Clare's inhibition is not curiously displayed as a thing in itself, an almost scientific concern; it is shown as part of a vast spiritual action; pointing the tragedy of the ideal love between Angel and Tess that it shatters; moving our souls with an actual foiling of the beauty in things by the cruelty that is in them too. Mr. Hardy's revolt is an artistic presentation; not a statement. It shows us a particular discord in the white light of the radiance of ultimate harmony. In this it goes with *Othello* and is apart from the *Bacchæ*, *The Possessed* and *Jude the Obscure*, which reveal the more profound disbelief, hinting that an ultimate harmony is not. Euripides, Dostoevsky and Hardy passed, in their turn, through dissatisfaction to disbelief.

Yet the element of this scepticism is plainly discernible all through Mr. Hardy's poetry. In the sonnet 'At a Bridal: Nature's Indifference,' written (though not published) as early as 1866, one form of it is amazingly explicit. As the woman 'paces forth to wait maternity,' a vision of other offspring fills her lover's mind — the high-purposed children who would have been, had they two ever mingled. He questions the goodness of Birth; what does she answer?

'that she does not care

If the race all such sovereign types unknowns.'

Here is the seed of a profound rejection, not of human worth, but of the divine scheme of things. It bursts forth in the unforgettable close of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. A sweet and sinless girl is hanged; human justice in fact would not have been quite so harsh; but it might have made her suffer more; her execution is the symbol, not of man's cruelty but of the tragic wantonness of destiny. The artist throws his sceptre at the injurious gods.

'Justice was done and the President of the Immortals (in Æschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess. And the D'Urberville knights slept on in their tombs unknowing.'

The sins of the fathers fall on the children, and the dead do not know. It is well, nevertheless, to be alive, says this religious scepticism. There is much cruelty in life; but is not death the supreme cruelty?

τοὺς ζῶντας εὖ δοῦν κατθανόν δὲ πᾶς ἀνὴρ
γῇ καὶ σκιά τὸ μηδὲν εἰς οὐδὲν ῥέπει

'The touch of a hand is warm,' the embrace of whatever hereafter there be is cold. Thus the humanism of modern literature has a Pagan quality; though our pantheon enshrine not the awesome inscrutability of the gods, but the richer mysteries of human sympathy. Yet there are moments when this must

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seem to us a desperate faith. What if one's belief in man fail? Mankind is no better than oneself, and who – above all, who that endures the travail of art – is always master of his soul?

That Mr. Hardy feels the spiritual *desiderium* that comes with the casting off of faith, seems to appear allegorically in the fierce satire of 'The Church-BUILDER.' For I think we may find a deeper, cryptic lesson in its close. A man devotes all his wealth and care to the rearing of a splendid church. 'Illume this fane,' he cried, 'that not in vain I build it, Lord of all!' But only ill-fortune comes to him; his sons rebel; his toil is met with contempt; no faith is kindled; 'the world moves as erstwhile'; his own hope is withered in its barrenness. There is one remedy. He ties a cord 'around the beam midway 'twixt Cross and truss,' from that he hangs, and journeys

'To that land whence
No rumour reaches us . . .

"He might," they'll say,
"Have built, some way,
A cheaper gallows-tree!"'

But might he? Is it not better to have worshipped and lost than never to have worshipped at all? This,

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beyond his obvious cynicism, I take to be Mr. Hardy's meaning.

In this temperamental pendulum-sway between hope in mankind and regret for the loss of a more primitive solace, Mr. Hardy is the archetype of the deeper modern spirit in literature.

X: MODERNISM (II)

I AM forced to use sporadic illustrations in my attempt to adumbrate the differences of spiritual outlook that distinguish the poetry of our day and problems from that which is not modern. It must be clear, at any rate, that the values of modernistic literature are preponderatingly romantic. All fundamental doubts and questionings, from Euripides' day to our own, expel the classical spirit of acceptance and balanced presentation.

So, before I go on to further instances of the kind of problem that Mr. Hardy, for one, deals with; before I come to Mr. Phillpotts and the lesson of his classicism; I must remind readers of what I said near the beginning, of the difficulties of language. To romanticism, style, in the narrowest sense, is irrelevant. That pushes my conception of romanticism very far; but it is a fundamental critical fact, and as such should not be evaded; though it is perhaps too strict for application; since no work can be defined as *entirely* romantic, and the existence of 'style' pure and simple is almost an abstract assumption. As the motives that lie behind and sustain an artist's creation tend more and more to excessive feeling in a particular direction, to absolute dependence upon some prevailing aspect of the scheme of things; his construction (which is part of style in the broader

sense) becomes less instinctive and easy. So much that is important in putting together a work – at any rate, a sustained work – of art, becomes submerged in the artist's consciousness, loses the place it should have in a blending of relative values. Take the question of workaday probability or plausibility as such an element, and see how in Ibsen's plays it develops from nothing in *Peer Gynt*, a romantic epic, to the stark classicism of *Rosmersholm*¹; take the decline of his classic stringency from that point, and see how it coincides with the growth of his mysticism from *The Lady From the Sea* to *When We Dead Awaken*, illustrating the converse; for the mysticism in its turn weakened the control of the sense of relativity. That is of course a pronounced instance; literature in general shows more subtle gradations.

¹ NOTE. – A reader of this MS. has detected a seeming inconsistency in the instancing of a social drama of Ibsen as classic presentation, since Ibsen is supposed pre-eminently to write as one with a 'message.' The answer to this is that Ibsen's protest, his rebellion, is not against the Scheme of Things but against local and temporary customs: not inherent in his view of the universe, but simply the guiding motive in his choice of theme and method of construction. As a matter of fact this particular play *Rosmersholm* is a conspicuously detached and even presentation of life, with little explicit passion or temperamental bias in its author. It is less trammelled by 'propaganda' than the earlier *Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, and is an infinitely better play. But, what is of far more general import to

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The egotistical tendency inherent in all romantic art; the desire for self-revelation in a degree that precludes subdual to a carefully wrought presentation of life – enhances and is enhanced by informality of language. A twentieth-century writer trying to express his *persona* – as express it somehow he must – in the form of an epic poem, would find our present language inadequate. And the effect of this particular state of our language is that he would unconsciously see to it that the epic and not the personality suffered.

Only in social drama can the heights of achievement be reached through the kind of colloquial language that is prevalent in our poetry. I say the heights; but they are not the same heights that fiction can aspire to; nor, obviously, in the social drama of Shaw a thing of the same potentiality as tragedy.

my argument, there is no connection between the philosophical attitude of the romantic artist in sustained forms and the purpose of a writer who may find it fit to interweave his presentation of life and customs with a protest against some social or moral abuses that distress him. The latter is quite compatible with a successful classical presentation. Euripides was a romantic not because he satirized with bitter feeling certain forms of religious and moral superstition among his fellow citizens; but because the whole of his reflection upon life was conditioned by the instinctive recoil of his nature from the cruel and unwitting helplessness of human destiny, which his forerunners accepted.

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In drama, austere control of the action, sustained by an underlying dignity of conception, takes the place of noble language. In drama, that is, more is *implicit*. The 'social' dramatist, working in the terms and the material of everyday life, bringing his problems as near as possible to the hearts of all of us, on the stage, in the space of a couple of hours, is not practising the most abiding kind of art. But he has necessarily his own significance, and, if he can approach his own minor perfection, he is more important than a merely groping epic poet or epic novelist. From his point of view the English of to-day, which that renowned philologist Professor Jespersen of Copenhagen tells us has been stripped of needless repetition and is now perfected as an instrument of intelligent speech, is a very satisfactory medium. So, for the matter of that, was the Danish of *Rosmersholm*; so, with very slight reservations, was the French of *Le Ménage de Garçon* or of *Le Gendre de M. Poirier*.

It is worth careful notice, then, that the most important of our present-day epic poets (in the old use of the word 'epic'), Mr. Doughty, and the most memorable of our recent prose-dramatists, J. M. Synge, have both jettisoned — having each a way of escape — our conventional speech. Synge, whose plays are

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certainly not the most profound or intensely cultivated examples of modern prose drama, is really pre-eminent by virtue of their inherent poetry. Language is the condition of atmosphere – a fact too easily forgotten. ‘The Playboy of the Western World’ really *has* language – artificial, if you will – and can move us through the purely literary sense by sudden flashes as no play of Mr. Shaw or Mr. Granville Barker ever does. Synge had no particular ‘modernistic’ force; his dramatic effects were independent of *explicitly* poetic expression (as in comedy, indeed, they must be); he was not a man of supreme intellect, perhaps not even unduly sensitive to the kind of experience that nourishes vitality in dramatic recreation; not comprehensive. It is significant that Synge’s comedy for all its underlying note of dreamy spirituality, leaves more impression of ‘classical’ finality than do most of the best products of our social stage. I suggested earlier that Synge’s work constituted a breakaway from the prevalent romanticism of the Celtic revival; this may be traceable to an insistent sense of ultimate form in language, given to those writers whose faculty of language is unique and is their principal endowment. A conscious desire to bring language to a particular perfection does not co-exist equally with a conscious desire to

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think beyond the legacy of others. One impulse must predominate; it is the eternal struggle. Romanticism is never easy; classicism in modern times is hampered by too rebellious and too insatiable habits of thinking. The prevailing quality of the newer literature which we call 'modernism' tends invariably to the suppression of that other property which in the plastic arts Mr. Clive Bell has labelled 'Significant Form.'

It has been said of Mr. Hardy, with vague sagacity, that he 'writes no language.' He certainly expresses himself in the way of the romantics; but he is none the less a great wielder of words whose fashion is remembered for their own sake. He is a finer stylist in prose than in poetry, where the personal idiom is more apparent; but everywhere the impression produced by the language is that of Mr. Hardy's powerful idiosyncrasy, and not that of the inevitable, final felicity that classical culmination impels.

An examination of Mr. Hardy's considerable body of poetry would be outside the scope of this book; for reasons already implied. I return to him now to emphasize, firstly, that the use he makes of language is a thing incidental to his comprehensive genius, and is not an influence upon others. He cannot strictly be called a master of language; his weapon is

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not consistently good for all purposes. There are scores of poems by Mr. Hardy of which the expression is bathetic; there is almost none, however, in which the seriousness and originality of his expression quite loses its force. He never contorts or strains his thought to meet a need of language, or to attain a far-fetched verbal felicity; on the other hand, his awareness of language, his intuitive discipline of ideas to words, is not strong enough to stimulate imagination itself – which stimulus is certainly present in Shakespeare's work, and more obviously if less fruitfully so in that of a classical master such as Milton.

Secondly, and this is still more important here, the questioning of life that reaches its relentless climax in *Jude the Obscure* can be passed over in no estimate of the literary achievement of modern England. It may be said to be a stage in the evolution of our consciousness; to all who are serious it is a supreme seriousness. What concerns us most in *Jude the Obscure* is not the treatment of religious disbelief or of conventions; nor the realization of a type of woman to whom the physical aspect of sex is incurably repellent. The use of these, whether the author was or was not in the beginning quite conscious of it, is to isolate more clearly an enigmatic terror in

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life which had never been so forcibly presented before, but which has very definitely left its impression upon sensitive minds since.

The conception of love which must be described, for better or worse, as monogamic may proceed from a primitive impulse, may have received an adventitious stimulus from social necessity; but it is in fact comparatively new and is closely related to the teachings of Christ. It is to this day a commonplace that the love poetry of Englishmen is addressed to a woman as a wife, or a future wife, or a lost wife; but that of the Frenchman is simply addressed to a mistress. It must not necessarily be supposed that the actual sentiment of Englishmen and Frenchmen differs so widely; French literature, as has been said before, proceeds in a long-formed and rigid tradition. The English manner is much more flexible and expansive, and its cultural antecedents were very different. Between the spirit of

‘Venus toute entière à sa proie attachée’

and of Othello’s

‘I do love thee, and when I love thee not
Chaos is come again’

there is a gulf between utterly divergent civilizations and emotional views of life. This gulf, in literature

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at any rate, remains. In no two really distinct literatures is the motive of love alike.

Behind this, of course, lurks a deeper, more general and more relevant truth. The attitude of man to such of the problems that beset him as are mainly spiritual is not formed by social custom or immediate factual experience. Nor is a man's view of, or response to, say, love dictated by an overmastering temperament. All these things are really based upon cumulative association of ideas, and this force acts upon the thinking and articulate section of a people through literature and the serious discussion which is dependent upon literature. The rarity of scepticism in the darker periods of religious dogma is in itself an illustration of the fact that the deeper emotional impulses are generated by associative thought rather than by temperament or personal experience.

The great impulses of poetry are religion and love. The ineffectuality of women in English poetry is notoriously due to the fact that sexual love in woman is not exclusive or absolute. Our finest women poets, Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, Alice Meynell, had their inspiration in a religion of which human love was but a gracious offshoot, wreathed in a kind of individual mysticism itself 'religious.' The *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the best work of a woman

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who can hardly be considered inferior intellectually to any of these, mark the comparative limitation of love as an exclusive motive of feminine creation in poetry. Sappho, immeasurably the greatest of woman poets, derived her erotic inspiration from a traditional feeling entirely different from any that the evolution of modern associative thought, in Europe at least, has left to us; a manner more simple, more physical, and, if suggestive of more complete spiritual immolation, only so by the accident of her greater intensity. The Greek tradition could never have produced the love-poetry of Shakespeare or Donne or Thomas Hardy; it does not comprise the fundamental masculine idea of single and durable spiritual possession; it leaves the sexes virtually in an equal inter-relation, involving equal potentiality of erotic inspiration to either sex – was indeed in a way bi-sexual. The power of this more simple conception of love, as well as its inadequacy to modern sensibility may be observed, by reason of her extraordinary saturation in the Greek tradition, in the modern poetess to whom I devote particular attention in this book; though even in her case classical imagery does not always control entirely the ‘romantic’ attitude which generations of Christian susceptibility have rendered a general condition of feeling.

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The poetry of love which was to earlier civilizations the intensification of an isolated, though urgent aspect of the spiritual adventure, has become in modern times the most comprehensive motive in the 'criticism of life' which Arnold justly defined as the essential condition of literature. In *Jude the Obscure* Mr. Hardy has presented the full and terrible implications of the state of consciousness to which the modern tradition of love has reduced all who are sensitive to it; has shown the helplessness of such an attitude in face of a relentless universe. And, so far as we of to-day are truly receptive, so far as there exists in us the spiritual quality of genuine poetry, we are simply a generation of lovers. Dogmatic religion has lost its hold; humanism by its very nature induces heightened amative susceptibility. Consider the symbols of Owen's 'Greater Love'; the retrospective experience that predominates in Rupert Brooke's best work; the aspect of life whose beauty is most fatal to Mr. Housman's apprehension; the manner of resignation that closes Mr. Hardy's 'In Time of the Breaking of Nations.' So inescapable a state of soul cannot be smilingly accepted nor cynically dismissed; it is the modern instance of the oft-neglected truth that man is as much the victim of his legacy of cumulative sensibility as of his physical

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heredity. A girl may die of love in an epigram by Callimachus or Meleager; one *might* die of any grief; but the death of Jude the Obscure, spiritually if not physically inevitable, is not due to grief or any *mere* emotion; it is the symbol of a newly-realized terror of the universe.

XI: CLASSICISM

CLASSICISM, the detached and balanced presentation of life, the relation of values irrespective of temperament and personal philosophy, the subordination of the artist's own emotions and moral purposes to the form and reality of his creation, is alien to the traditions of English poetical literature. Except in the so-called Augustan period, which was comparatively barren, the classical element has been very meagre throughout our history. Since Wordsworth, in the nineteenth century and that extension of it which we strive to distinguish as the twentieth, it has virtually been ousted from poetry altogether. Landor had the technical equipment and the directness of a classicist:

‘Rose Aylmer, whom these wakeful eyes,
May weep, but never see:
A night of memories and of sighs
I consecrate to thee.’

The substitution of ‘a night’ for the customary vagueness or infinity of time, and the general tone are classical; but the delicacy and sufficiency of the Greek Anthology are not suggested here. Landor was an extreme egotist; and a coarseness of fibre placed him below the level of really pene-

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trating achievement. Moreover, he was a cultural hybrid: not only had he a foot in the eighteenth century, a perplexing characteristic enough for the excitable disciple of the Romantic Revival, but

‘Through the trumpet of a child of Rome
Rang the pure music of the flutes of Greece.’

Which, all the more for its untruth, indicates clearly the fallacy of regarding Landor as the unfollowed leader of a revival of robust traditions. In the chastest and most scholarly of Swinburne’s own productions, in *Atalanta in Calydon*: in the *Philostetes* and *Orestes* of De Tabley; in John Addington Simmonds’ most determined Hellenism, there is much pure music; but it never does echo the Grecian flute. It only reveals the romanticism of the most egoistic of all literary epochs: and that romanticism was never itself without its trumpet. The intense classicism, in the true sense, of Jane Austin, who never read a word of Greek or studied a literary theory in her life, would outweigh the diffused remnants of classical feeling in the literature of many decades following her death. But, as Arnold insisted, we are a race of poets: genius preponderates over reason in us; we do not revel in the free play of intelligence. The

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first condition of a classical standpoint is a qualified submission to the intellect.

None of these remarks, however, must be taken to imply a preference for the classical tendency in art, still less as a veiled assertion of its superiority. The greatest writers, Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, were comparatively pure romantics; the two latter, indeed, typifying each a supreme motive of romanticism; asserting the autonomy of the soul's own strength or own self-refutation to all Time. The great romantics do not 'abide our question.' But the deficiencies of modern romantic poetry are far from these sources.

The classical predilection, in poetry at any rate, is only native to one literature of modern Europe, the French: and in those branches of literature where the imagination counts France is a bad third to England and Italy. Even in criticism, where her equality is just arguable, it is so on the strength of native logic, improving sixteenth-century derivations from Italy or formulating a quite modern grasp of international culture: Joubert and Brunetiere, if more satisfying than Coleridge and Arnold, being less 'creative': Sainte-Beuve, though more comprehensive than Lamb, not richer in humane or æsthetic perception — in poetical qualities.

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French poetry proper is not an argument against classicism but against a particular type of classicism, a narrow development: in a sense it countenances the lack of the Greek quality in the romantic literatures, since it is itself no nearer to Sophocles than they.

Greece has no monopoly of classical virtues – there were no ancient writers greater in their kind than Molière and Dryden: but it may be assumed without undue dogmatism that Sophocles is the highest embodiment of the classical attitude in poetry. Of the many kinds of classical convention in which Phœbus has been dignified, his is the least limited. The formal restrictions of the Attic drama he practised do not matter: most art strengthens itself by keeping within rigid boundaries; and the fundamental classical impulse, moderation, certainly does so.

Judged by the Sophoclean standard English, the greatest of poetical literatures, has no very lofty classicist poetry. All our classical conventions are more artificial; invite the little prefix, neo-. The elements of a classicist modulation were in Chaucer; but after him came the romantic fancifulness, so irresistible, of Spenser: then the powerful, unrestrained, romantic abandon of the Elizabethans, and

the main English tradition was formed. Ben Jonson stood outside it: but Jonson's attitude was personal, idiosyncratic, limited; unequal to the full implications of his catholic culture and wide critical awareness. His predominant quality was a kind of gigantic, distorting wit; poetical imagination was secondary to it. He might have founded a school of comedy with Molièresque potentialities; but his example was too difficult for his generation, attentive though it was, to assimilate.

The classical (or neo-classical) tendency in our poetic history leaves outstanding only the names of Milton; Marvell – Donne was spiritually a romantic, an absolutist of love, whatever may have been the nature of his free intellect – Cowley, Dryden, Pope, Collins, Gray (considerable reactionaries – unfruitful); perhaps Thomson and Crabbe, remorselessly swamped by keener if not deeper spirits whose new manner found readier hearing. Now about all these men there was undeniably either something derivative or something quite eccentric to the main current of national feeling. Milton was of all great writers the most artificial. The nature of the man was cased as in armour in the impenetrable inhuman splendour of his verbiage. A bigot in faith, a pedant in culture, a moral Puritan whose poetic vision never

glanced at the realities of life, he is utterly lost to sight in the contemplation of that resplendent heaven and earth that arises – out of chaos? – beneath his wand. His poetry might be said, with reservations, to be the expressions of a manner rather than of a man. From my previous argument it may naturally be objected: is not this the way of detached, classical art? I must be permitted to refer to what I have said earlier in the book as to the essentially humanistic nature of artistic values. To this assumption – to me the conditions of all literary feeling and valuation – that kind of objective poetry, Milton's in particular, in which verbal magnificence – magniloquence – surpasses all other qualities, is a difficult problem. 'Hardy has no, or no essential, splendour': 'Milton has nothing to do with Life': if one or other of these must sit on the right hand of Shakespeare, surely, my interlocutor says, there are two theories of literary achievement? The difference of value is not, however, that between the classical and romantic attitudes: though it is clear evidence of the existence of these differing attitudes.

Milton, says Coleridge, 'shapes all things to the Unity of his own ideal': he is, that is, an epic poet in the old, formal, conventional sense of the word – not as used by Mr. Abercrombie in his study of

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Mr. Hardy. Comparing Milton with Æschylus, a greater poet, and 'epic' in the modern sense, we find that the Greek is equally lofty, as austere religious and more inherently so; his mind is in more intimate contact with life. A minor classicist poet, say Akenside, can be as aloof and magniloquent as he pleases; misses the penetration by life altogether, and sinks to an infinitely lower plane. It is not detachment from life that elevates the classicist, it is the degree of comprehension attained within the qualifications of that detachment. Beyond this too, of course, there is needed adequate expression. The English classicists have this one supremacy in poetry: they are, excepting Shakespeare, the only real masters of language. That is a good deal, since our literary language was formed by romantic traditions of feeling to the uses of a romantic literature. The greater technical adaptability of the classicists is a phenomenon to be remembered in considering the limitations of contemporary poetry.

To return to Milton's position in the history of the classical idea. His habits of language had shaped his æsthetic responsiveness into a Latin mould. But a Latin mould of language is not a Latin way of thought. His translation of the Fifth Ode of the First Book of Horace:

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‘What slender youth, bedew’d with liquid odours,
Courts thee on roses in some pleasant cave,
Pyrrha? For whom bindest thou
In wreaths thy golden hair
Plain in thy neatness? . . .’

may well claim to rank among the worst translations ever made. In truth Milton neither inherited nor left any tradition of poetic feeling or any poetic attitude to those realities which are generally supposed to constitute the essence of great literature. He is apart; defies our question. Yet compare him with Dryden; that robust English sensibility saturated in Latin culture and judiciously tintured with the diluted classicism of France, that masterly observer of the whole visible world, gracious, strong, rich in human sympathy, unfaltering in his easy mastery of words; compare them and you feel at once that Milton, diminutive in every other respect, is immeasurably the grander poet. It is not merely that he has a translunary vision and imagery that Dryden notably lacked. They both, says Mr. Eliot, ‘triumphed with a dazzling disregard of the soul.’ But the truth is that Milton, having lost the human soul, created a dazzling and triumphant substitute. The sensibility from which his perception flowers is as that, not of a sentient man, but of an observant

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god. The illusion is complete. Dante is in time and space; his effects are referable to our norm of experience: but the Heaven and Hell of Milton are outside time and space and reason. There we do not rejoice, we do not suffer, we do not feel at all. We are no more in contact with a man Milton than with an archangel Gabriel. This sheer sublimity – not the Longinian *hypsos* – is maintained at varying degrees of remoteness, but its quality is always irreducible to our other experiences.

‘They left me there when the grey-hooded eve,
Like a sad votarist in palmer’s weed,
Crept o’er the hindmost wheel of Phœbus’ wain’

‘ . . . which cost Ceres all that pain
to seek her through the Earth.’

‘Should I another rib afford, and God
Create another Eve, yet less of thee
Would never from my heart.’

These passages range from utter classicism, through a semblance of passion, to something like humanity; but it is humanity with a difference. The words of Adam are the words of a sublime personification, not of a man. He speaks, as all Milton’s puppets speak, with a majestic unreality. The response to Milton’s poetry in its essentials is a product

of unique and artificial sensibility. It seems not difficult to acquire. The reason is that there is a stage of culture at which one is as easily worked upon by associations of language as by associations of experience. It is the supreme achievement of Milton's attitude that he evokes our sense of language, distorts it by his power to his own idiosyncrasies, and subdues the protests of our human experience wholly to his spell. And though the Miltonic captivation is a kind of madness it is a divine mania; its ultimate influence is so exalted that no anthropocentric argument of literary theory can refute his greatness.

The classicism of Marvell (who may be taken as the best representative of an interesting period) is more partial and of a kind more native to the English spirit. Marvell's work is essentially the product of a Latin culture. He has the grace and good-breeding, the absence of provincialism, that marked the circle of Augustus. A certain diffidently revealed depth of sensibility allies him to Catullus. As Catullus, by reason of his preponderating care for the tragic nature of love and for the pathos of man's morality, was more romantic than; say, Horace; so Marvell was *a fortiori* a less pure classicist than Dryden; nearer to the tragic preoccupations of Donne. A smaller poet than Donne, he has yet a literary balance

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that Donne lacked. The *Coy Mistress*, for all its emotional intensity, derives firmness of outline and imagery from a kind of intellectual sanity foreign to romantic poetry. The emotional content is clearly perceived, kept within bounds and related directly to the physical symbol.

‘I would
Love you ten years before the Flood . . .
I always hear
Time’s winged chariot hurrying near. . . .
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball. . . .’

This is certainly not the voice of a typical classical spirit; yet the language is unmistakably that of one to whom intellectual apprehension of life is the stuff of poetical perceptions. The soul and the senses operate *within* the action of the mind; they do not precede the conscious effort of quite rational thought. There is a close connection between the autonomy of reason in poetical creation and concreteness of the image. When reason, or wit, is in the ascendant there is a tendency to denote or state an emotional condition by direct reference; when the imagination is unbridled it inclines to vague equivalence, to the limitless *suggestion* of other emotional states not so clearly realized in the mind’s eye of the reader. As

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an instance of what even our modern romantic poetry might derive from a touch of the former, consider how unusually satisfying is the impression left by Mr. Edgell Rickword in the two opening lines of a sonnet called 'Intimacy':

'Since I have seen your stocking swallow up,
A strong black wind, the flame of your pale foot . . .

There is a characteristic modern weakness in the word 'pale' which carries an uncomfortable aura of sensuo-spiritual implication which 'white' would have avoided; but for the rest the simple image is as memorable as anything in the minor poetry of recent years. Wit, in the Jacobean sense, is present. It need not be inferred, however, that this quality is necessary to, or even wholly compatible with, the highest poetry. There is perhaps some antithesis between the most pure and exalted romantic imagination and this sharp intellectual contact which provides such delightfully tangible images. Yet in Marvell's highest flights he never wholly loses the faculty:

'All before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

By industrious valour *climb*
To ruin the great work of Time.
And *cast* the kingdoms old
In another *mould*.'

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For the finest instances of the simplified symbol in English one must look to prose, but there the function of the intellect is different – for in prose language is created by, rather than creates, meaning.

‘That long for death and it cometh not, that dig for it more than for hid treasure.’

Perhaps it is the last limitation of classicist poetry that the necessary ascendancy of reason over absolute imagination brings it a little way in the direction of prose.

Since Marvell’s literary method is being praised somewhat to the disparagement of the modern tradition, let us by way of test place the Horatian Ode beside the most famous poem of Lionel Johnson, which happens to be on a similar theme. Few enthusiasts of modern poetry, I think, would disclaim it as representative, or object that Marvell’s sensibility to the particular theme was finer.

‘That thence the Royal actor borne
The tragic scaffold might adorn;
While round the armed bands
Did clap their bloody hands;
‘He nothing common did or mean
Upon that memorable scene,
But with his keener eye
The axe’s edge did try:

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'Nor called the gods with vulgar spite,
To vindicate his helpless right;
But bowed his comely head
Down, as upon a bed.'

Lionel Johnson's poem is too long to quote entirely;
but it will be remembered that his occasion is the
statue of Charles at Charing Cross and his setting
the stars and the night.

'Comely and calm he rides
Hard by his own Whitehall:
Only the night wind glides;
No crowds, nor rebels brawl. . . .

'Alone he rides, alone,
The fair and fatal king:
Dark night is all his own
That strange and solemn thing.

'Although his whole heart yearn
In passionate tragedy:
Never was face so stern
With sweet austerity. . . .

'Vanquished in life, his death
By beauty made amends:
The passing of his breath
Won his defeated ends. . . .

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‘Armoured he rides, his head,
Bare to the stars of doom:
He triumphs, now, the dead,
Beholding London’s gloom.

‘Our wearier spirit faints,
Vexed in the world’s employ:
His soul was of the saints,
And art to him a joy.

‘King, tried in fires of woe!
Men hunger for thy grace,
And through the night I go,
Loving thy mournful face. . . .’

The comparison, æsthetically, is not of course absolutely *in pari materia*. The modern romantic aims at a wider spiritual revelation; is in a sense more ambitious. But even those – and I am not with them – who consider Johnson’s poem a success must admit that, in comparison with Marvell’s incidental lines, it lacks grip of reality. It is not a question of the falsity of his characterization of the Charles of history; that is not necessarily an æsthetic objection. Nor is it merely that the relation of the king to the silence of night and the starry courtiers is a rather strained romantic fancy – I am considering the view of those who like that sort of thing. Nor is Johnson

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relatively shallow in imagination or infelicitous in phrasing. But the presentation lacks tangibility; makes an impression on the reader's mind which, compared with Marvell's passage, is vague. There is, too, a 'third movement,' the idea, hinted at but not assimilated into the imaginative scheme of a post-humous 'triumph' in the king 'beholding London's gloom,' which from its own point of view is weak as it certainly does not harmonize with the transcendental vision to which:

'The stars and heavenly deeps
Work out a perfect will.'

which is in a wider spiritual dimension. And how disconcerting, with all regard to the romantic freedom of fancy, is the hazy, groping feeling of the whole poem when brought to the touchstone of Marvell's intellectual sanity. Yet Johnson was a man of strong, almost austere intelligence; in a happier tradition he might have been a minor poet of real value. The greatest deficiency of the King Charles poem is its lack of solid imagery. Idea melts vaguely into idea and equivalence into equivalence. There is no precise location and limitation of the perceptions. One becomes conscious of exaggeration, a lack of common sense, a prodigality of superlatives quite

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remote from the imaginative abandon of a type of great poetry. A 'vast' silence reigns instead of the simple and impressive word 'silence,' where the whole context has gone to make vastness self-evident; the silence later on becomes 'splendid,' a most unhappy instance of the lack of significance into which romantic phrasing is liable to fall whenever the creative tension relaxes. Charles is 'the saddest of all kings' – why? The whole poem goes to imply that he has a kind of serenity. That superlative has no æsthetic justification. Again, the poet asks:

'Which are more full of fate:
The stars, or those sad eyes?
Which are more still and great:
Those brows, or the dark skies?'

It is not a condition of poetical questions, certainly, that they be answerable; but it is required that they stimulate the reader's imagination. This stanza, however comfortably rotund it may sound, inspires nothing. Did I believe this to be due to a defect in Johnson's poetical apprehension it would serve no purpose in the argument; but what I wish to suggest is that it is weak through a weak tradition of language; that it is a surrender to a phrase that resembles the fashionable conception of evocative power.

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A true poetic comparison *challenges* in a different way.

‘Exegi momentum aere perennius . . .

‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day:
Thou art more lovely and more temperate . . .

‘You meaner beauties of the night,
That poorly satisfy our eyes . . .
What are you when the moon shall rise? . . .
You are violets that first appear,
By your pure purple mantles known.
What are you, when the rose is blown?

‘Avez vous observé que maints cercueils de vieilles
Sont presque aussi petits que celui d’un enfant?’

These comparisons are all, in their different ways, realizable; they relate the immediate perception to a correspondence in the visible world. But, for the benefit of those who admire Marvell as being very much of a spiritual romantic, or who perhaps do not bow to Lionel Johnson, I will make one further comparison, between a very unpopular Augustan poet and a modern who has received more unqualified homage than Johnson. The theme of both is one of the beautiful commonplaces of poetical feeling. Pope’s lines ‘To the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady’ do indeed, with the close of the Dunciad,

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represent the summit of his sheer lyrical achievement; but his greatest admirer and the dozen of our Augustan critics dismissed them in a phrase of immortal and immortalizing absurdity.¹

'Is there no bright reversion in the sky
For those who greatly think or bravely die?
Why bade ye else, ye powers, her soul aspire
Above the vulgar flight of low desire? . . .
Most souls, 'tis true, but peep out once an age,
Dull, sullen pris'ners in the body's cage;
Dim lights of life, they burn a length of years
Useless, unseen, as lamps in sepulchres;
Like Eastern kings, a lazy state they keep,
And, close confined to their own place, sleep.
From these, perhaps (ere nature bade her die),
Fate snatched her early to the pitying sky. . . .
What can atone (O ever injured shade!)
Thy fate unpitied, and thy rites unpaid?
No friend's complaint, no kind domestic tear,
Pleased thy pale ghost, or graced thy mournful
bier . . .
What though no weeping loves thy ashes grace,
Nor polish'd marble emulate thy fate?
What though no sacred earth allow thee room,
Nor hallow'd dirge be mutter'd o'er thy tomb?
Yet shall thy grave with rising flower's be dress'd
And the green turf lie lightly on thy breast:

¹ 'Sir . . . poetry is not often worse employed than in dignifying the amorous furies of a raving girl.'

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'There shall the morn her earliest tears bestow,
There the first roses of the year shall blow;
While angels with their fairy wings o'ershade
The ground now sacred by thy relics made. . . .
A heap of dust alone remains of thee;
'Tis all thou art, and all the proud shall be!'

Here are some lines, roughly parallel in occasion to Pope's, from Dr. Bridges' 'Elegy on a Lady, whom Grief for the Death of her Beloved Killed.' The poem is pretty well known, but it may be mentioned that the missing portion contains no 'third movement' as was in Lionel Johnson's, and has no specific modernity in feeling or conception that renders it more ambitious than Pope's; no attempt at wider comprehension.

'Assemble, all ye maidens, at the door,
And all ye loves assemble; far and wide
Proclaim the bridal, that proclaimed before
Has been deferred to this late eventide . . .
Cloak her in ermine, for the night is cold,
And wrap her warmly, for the night is long;
In pious hands the flaming torches hold,
While her attendants, chosen from among
Her faithful virgin throng,
May lay her in her cedar litter,
Decking her coverlet with sprigs of gold,
Roses and lilies white that best befit her . . .

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'Now to the river bank the priests are come;
The bark is ready to receive its freight:
Let some prepare her place therein, and some
Embark the litter with its slender weight:
The rest stand by in state,
And sing her a safe passage over:
While she is oared across to her new home,
Into the arms of her expectant lover. . . .'

Modern complaisance does not, it is true, go so far as to claim that Dr. Bridges is a greater writer than Pope. Pope has his dignified niche, in a kind of traditional museum, and he is not lightly challenged — or, indeed, disturbed. But it is tacitly accepted that he is not a real poet; there is nothing in him to enrich or edify an enlightened modern sensibility. He was a mordant satirist, inclined to duplicity in his personal dealings; he had no soul. His conception of beauty is dismissed as abnormal to English right feeling by a great many people who have certainly been at little pains to ascertain in what literary media this feeling finds its most genuine outlet. But it is possible to feel from the present comparison that Pope's poetry is after all more native and less exotic; more robust and less derivative emotionally, than that of the Laureate. That of course is not necessarily an absolute valuation, a judgment of greater

or less; it is just one aspect. Nor is Dr. Bridges' perception, the quality of his temperament, defective. It would be rather dangerous to suggest that Pope's is the finer æsthetic or moral sensitiveness. The original sensitiveness of a writer is neither heightened nor impaired by the manner of language he employs.

The impression given by Dr. Bridges' poem is much the less vivid. The perceptions felt by the poet and conveyed to the reader are less sharp and clear cut. The modern resonance of

'Cloak her in ermine, for the night is cold,
And wrap her warmly, for the night is long . . .'

veils a tautology, and on consideration one sees that ermine might as fitly or more fitly go with the long night, and warm wrapping has a closer connection with the coldness than with the length of the night. So neither phrase is compulsive, final, inevitable. There is a looseness of grasp and construction which one could not possibly imagine in the writings of Pope or any competent heritor of his traditions. One of the most serious losses their posterity has sustained is the habit of compression, which is a strength and a safeguard against many pitfalls. Compare the impact on the sensibility of

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'There the first roses of the year shall blow,'
with that of

'Decking her coverlet with sprigs of gold,
Roses, and lilies white that best befit her.'

and you see that elaborate and cultivated effort has failed to achieve what the seeming insouciance of real mastery does unquestionably.

Neither of these elegies has any claim to rank as major poetry, both are derivative and proceed from too tenuous 'fundamental brainwork.' But they are unoriginal in different ways, and the difference is instructive. Neither poem is strong with the strength of fresh perceptions. But Pope built upon acceptance of conventionalized ideas; Dr. Bridges — a much more serious limitation — on acceptance of conventionalized phrasing, a mode of language that has grown so familiar as to distract attention from the true significance of the objects to which it refers.

In fact, the derivative nature of a 'philosophy' such as Pope instils into his poetry does not greatly matter. An artist in the slighter forms does not necessarily require a new and personal attitude towards the universe — the phrase is unavoidable if pompous. Related to this is an even more important critical premiss, of which the classicists have usually been

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more aware than the romantics. The major poet, he whose comprehension has a universal applicability, will be always a man of deep understanding; but his achievement does not require that he put into his poetry the most subtle and exhaustive intellectual processes of which he is capable. The great English romantics, except Shakespeare, have come through in indifference to this; whence the proverbial inability of genius to distinguish its favourite work from its best. Shelley loved the tortuous mental processes of *Epipsychidion* and *The Revolt of Islam*, and Browning thought that in *Sordello* his genius was grappling with obstacles which to overcome was the condition of artistic triumph. Keats devoted the best powers of his young intellect to technical virtuosity, a less dangerous heresy, which he had already discarded for fuller emotional liberation in the later *Hyperion*. Wordsworth displayed more reasoning power in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* than in any of his imaginative creation, and he never wrote worse than when he was trying to extend his critical intelligence into a shaping factor of his poems. The best of Mr. Hardy's lyrics are those in which his intensely temperamental view of life touches with an exquisitely simple verisimilitude some commonplace incident and shows it as an epitome of the complex

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nature of things, without intellectual insistence upon the complexity. The phrase of Rossetti which I quoted is an excellent one, but he himself in his *House of Life* and all the poets of his group – except his sister – conspicuously forgot the significance of the word fundamental.

The classicists, whose essence a modern critic has recently defined as 'submission to an exterior spiritual authority,' have been more immune from the metaphysical heresy, since the habits of their intellect in artistic creation are different, inclined to observation rather than to speculation. Neither Ben Jonson nor Dryden gives in his imaginative work any hint of the critical genius and the culture that differentiated them from the world about them, and involved a very profound divergence from the spirit of the artistic limitations which each cheerfully accepted. They submitted to the exterior authority, though if I were going to adopt that phrase I would extend it to embrace intellectual submission as well. The classicist does not conceive of his intellect as the instrument of spiritual inquiry, and so it does not have the same chance of mastering him. No poet can afford to be dictated to by a restless discursive faculty.

The exterior authority to which our neo-classical writers deferred was simple, but it is not often recog-

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nized by literary historians. It was a matter of 'Church and State.' The values of the polite Augustan writer were based upon a principle of rank and order in an unquestioned social hierarchy. Pope is generally most magnificent when he treats of the English aristocracy in the pomp of power or the pathos of decay, implying its – largely fallacious – cultural and spiritual ascendancy. What more impressive, and given the key necessarily so, than the famous

'In the worst inn's worst room, with mat half-hung,
The floor of plaster, and the walls of dung . . .
The George and Garter dangling from that bed
Where tawdry yellow strove with dirty red,
Great Villiers lies – alas, how changed from him,
That life of pleasure and that soul of whim!'

The whole cogency lies in the really artificial recognition of the greatness of a Buckingham; the actual poetical significance of the wretched nobleman's squalor is not the compulsive factor. It is quite a different thing from the power of:

'Ei mihi. Qualis erat! Quantum matatus ab illo
Hectore, qui redit exuvias indutus Achillis.'

which is also unromantic, built upon acceptance of an exterior conception, but more simply and spon-

taneous; classical and not proceeding from the artificial and half-deliberately narrowed sensibility of the neo-classicist. I do not of course imply that Virgil was a thorough classic; but in this case he spoke from a genuinely Homeric vein of feeling. It is interesting to observe the last traces of the Augustan assumptions in the prose of Macaulay, whose happiest rhetorical splendours are inspired by the traditional continuity of these purely social 'greatnesses' as the staple background of the national evolution which it was always his chief delight to contemplate. The effects which light up and give interest to all Macaulay's writings illustrate in a very suggestive way the essence of the neo-classical convention in our literature, surviving in odd contrast to the Whiggish spirit and the pretentious moral striving of the early nineteenth-century—qualities of which he was no insufficient embodiment.

But the special nature of English neo-classicism is only relative to the wider theme of the general classical tendency in art, and since its significance is hardly of the future it must detain us no longer here. I must allow what I have said of the older English Augustan poets to stand in general terms for their younger brethren. To the more instinctive and perhaps to our present purpose even more important

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classicism of Greek lyric I must return in my treatment of H. D.

It is important however that we should not merely substitute a new and slightly different for an older complacency, and that the modern type of self-sufficiency, unproved, should not be accepted as richer in æsthetic possibilities because we happen to take account of more impressive spiritual questions. 'Philosophical' acquiescence is of the nature of classicism; to a romantic tradition it is quite subversive.

XII: THE POSSIBILITY OF A REVIVAL

'All one to you the forms and the reforming,
The fashion of the man, or mouse, or mountain,
So order be declared, and conquered chaos
Dethroned for ever.'

EDEN PHILPOTTS.

IT may well be asked whether it is reasonable or useful to expect a literature strong in the classical virtues to arise among the English people. But if the nature of classicism has not been too arbitrarily understood, it will be felt as a tendency inherent, in varying degree, in all comprehensive literary art. So even if submission to an exterior restraint does not come naturally to the English poet, there is yet something of a classical element in his heritage, and it can be cultivated and strengthened. To what purpose? it may further be asked. Well, the temptation of a change is always strong; but that will not do for a reason.

There is firstly this incidental reason; discipline of manner and technical effort are always to the good. Our current poetry is too easy to write. The knack is lightly gained; facility conduces to fluency; and fluency to weakness and insignificance. The austerity of language in Wilfred Owen's successful pieces – not the 'realistic' and colloquial ones – came after definite self-restraint and self-schooling. The inevitable rhythm of Mr. Housman, though it by no means

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constitutes a great style, is an inherent of his poetic quality, and is neither derivative nor imitable.

The individuality and general limitation of Mr. Hardy's poetic style has already been dwelt on. But even his method is a little facile, in the dangerous sense. One nearly always has a feeling that he may lapse. Neither Mr. Abercrombie's comprehensive intellectual grasp nor Mr. Gordon Bottomley's lofty command of poetic diction is altogether unimpaired by the indefinite nature of the traditions of language in which they have obviously been nourished. The reader who comes to 'Gruach' straight from Shakespeare, or even from Charles Wells or the Browning of 'Pippa Passes,' will be at once conscious of an overstrain in the modern's effort to include his content without impairing his eloquence; and the cause of this is that the modern idea involves a verbal exaltation that is not interdependent with the concrete images that should control its meaning and progress. Mr. Abercrombie, on the other hand, lacks audacity of expression; and this necessarily limits his imagery and restrains his imagination. In consequence his poetical work, superb though it often is, strikes one as being too *intellectual*. This is an impression one never gets from a poet who is really bold and untrammelled in his possession of language; and, curiously

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enough, never from a classicist who has any genuine lyrical quality. The conclusion seems to be that unless one is a very Shakespeare (and Shakespeare was a good deal straitened by the theatre) one cannot have the stars without going through the arduousness; and that this means not merely a struggle in the artist's own soul but a struggle with exterior necessities of form, medium and articulation.

I fear I have carried this 'technical' plaint very far for one who admits that all the habits of modern feeling in the English people are romantic; and that the urgent demand to be made of future literature is a deeper questioning of the tragic enigmas of life and a wider spiritual comprehension. But this is only a seeming anomaly.

Perhaps I seem to have argued, for instance, that where difficulties in self-expression do not exist they should be artificially imposed. In that fallacy there would lurk a germ of truth. But the apparent easiness of writing good poetry in the current conventions is delusory; for it springs from an æsthetic worthlessness. The Georgian convention evokes a response from the reader not by its own creative beauty of perception but by the subconscious literary associations it brings to life by the mere use of language generally accepted as the quality of beauty. Thus

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its inclination, spiritual and emotional, is mainly derivative. The facility so engendered is akin to the mechanical ease of the ordinary journalist or story-writer; it is not by its own nature a condition of fresh and significant perceptions.

The continuous study of romantic literature begets a derivative acceptance of ideas which were valuable only when conceived in a particular personality. A romantic perception of life is an individual thing; its values, when assimilated by a second personality and worked in as part of a creative attitude, cease to be vital and involve an emotional discrepancy. Nearly all modern poets take over indiscriminately the assumptions of other poets whom they have read, without subjecting them to the crucible of their own philosophy. It is particularly apparent in language; they often seem to speak a language in which they do not believe. Whereas spontaneity of language, so important to cogent expression, means an absolute correspondence between perception and the words which stand in the poet's consciousness as his own equivalent to the perception. The paradox bound up in real literary spontaneity lay behind the famous French dictum that your true writer has a natural facility and an acquired difficulty.

Our younger contemporary poets – those, roughly

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speaking, who have come to the fore in the last ten years, might be broadly grouped as Georgian traditionalists, 'eccentrics' and *genre* poets. The eccentrics have almost unanimously failed to justify their departures. It is difficult, that is to say, to think of one of them whose achievement will endure a couple of decades; or whose influence on poetry will be other than negative. A negative significance, as a symptom of the age's unrest and spiritual disintegration, they of course have and will have.

The *genre* poet is nearer detachment; and his medium necessarily restricts to some extent his egoism. (Not that egoism is a bad thing in a young poet, æsthetically speaking, but that an *ego* becomes more forceful the more deliberately it is subordinated.) Now Mr. Edmund Blunden is perhaps the most important of our very young poets. He is most emphatically a romantic: and he has certainly a more disciplined and durable *form* than many writers who have a much less fruitful romantic temperament. Of this, his restrictive choice of material is a chief factor. He is a poet of the countryside; so he has some points of affinity with Mr. Housman and with Mr. Phillpotts, one of our few classicist temperaments. Like these other two writers he has steeped himself in habits of poetic thought that embody instinctively a country-

man's manner of contemplation: and like them carries this 'flavour' of rural thought with him on his occasional excursions into much more philosophical and general themes. In a definitely non-personative poem like 'The Canal' Mr. Blunden really indulges a manner of imagination – liberates, one might say, a condition of consciousness – quite as remote from, quite as incongruous to, his natural eclectic, cultured and critical thought as is Mr. Housman's Shropshire lad from his preface to Manilius. The point I wish to establish is that a manner of poetical thought may be acquired which is not conditioned by, and not dependent upon, the poet's normal attitude to literature and to life in general. This might be described as a dramatized lyrical sense. It may seem to be a tremendous self-limitation. The fact remains that among our leading lyrical poets Mr. Housman, Mr. Blunden, H. D. and to a lesser extent, Mr. Phillpotts, do all write out of this semi-objectified mode of poetical feeling. Therefore also it is equally compatible with the most decided classicist tendency and with extreme modern romanticism. 'An acquired difficulty' . . . None of these four writers could possibly be described as over prolific, in poetry.

Modern romanticism is, I think, incapable of much development by *minor* writers along its present lines.

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There seem to be two ways of outlet. One depends upon the coming of genius, instanced in recent years perhaps only by the arrested achievement of Wilfred Owen – a romantic genius profound, comprehensive, prophetic, bearing in it the element of what is most valuable in the complex spiritual experience of the twentieth century, and capable of the tremendous intellectual effort and self-discipline that can relate this experience to what the great earlier traditions of feeling have left as the common and coherent legacy of man's sensibility, wherever sensibility exists. The yearnings and the repulsions of the human spirit have become more mysterious and less communicable.

“Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds
were.”

This emotional evolution is partly natural; partly accentuated by the unique and unforeseen realizations induced by the great European conflict. The creative mind has, as always, reacted to this experience in proportion to its own inherent value. What to a great writer like Mr. Hardy has been a fruitful experience, one that has developed and strengthened his æsthetic serenity, has affected most minor writers inversely, has rendered them incoherent and restless,

given them over an easy prey to a thousand disastrous repulsions and inhibitions and velleities. This is due quite as much to uncertainty of technique, of language, as to instability of temperament. A mind completely flexible within its limits and surely disciplined to an instinctive expression of its responses to life will bring away something artistically valuable from each new emotional impact. It is also undeniable that the more steeped is a mind in the cumulative æsthetic experiences of history, the less will it be unbalanced by unwonted disturbances of the sensibility, and the less liable to offer us as art the transient and insignificant in place of the general and significant. For though all is referable to personality, personality is nothing until it adjusts itself to a recognizable form of experience.

But, as well as the Hardys and the Owens who are free, literature has to take account of the less differentiated poets who 'abide our question' and who illustrate and form the creative environment of a people. Here tradition is all important: and tradition, as I have suggested earlier, is largely a question of technique. A poetic method comes from the imposition of the impersonal upon the personal, and of the personal upon the impersonal.

An ordered understanding of the earlier artists who

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have moulded his sensibility is not one whit less necessary to an artist than self-understanding. Dr. Johnson said of predetermination that 'all argument was in its favour and all experience against it.' So we might say of the legendary sufficiency of the artist's soul to his creation: all argument favours it and all experience goes to disprove it. Insistence upon this view may seem to smack of literary conservatism. The romantic *ego* of modern democracy is grown at least as menacing in the world of pure letters as anywhere else. To point him now and then to the essential continuity of human thought is not a wilful but a necessary gesture of conservatism: and though this conservatism does too involve a reminder that there has been in literature a serious tendency known as classicism, I hope that the two tendencies need not be lightly confused. Conservatism only depends upon classicism in the same degree as faith depends upon organized religion.

In the great periods of literary creation, powerful individuality has acquired strength and significance by its relation to an accepted spiritual and cultural centre. The value of diversity is in an underlying homogeneity. Of late years the boundaries of cultural experience have been greatly widened. There is so much more to be known; and so many different

kinds of knowledge have attracted the romantic temperament. The Greeks and the Romans no longer provide the sole passport to a cultural aristocracy. It is an unchanging fact, though not a universally admitted fact, that any literary consciousness not permeated with the spirit of old culture will always lapse continually into provincialism of thought and expression. Between poetry, in particular, and classical scholarship there is a natural and intimate sympathy: though an excess of either quality has often led to a slightly harmful dilettantism in the other.

It is less easy to perceive how the modern passion for minute psychological inquiry can be made to enrich æsthetic perception; especially in poetry, the sphere of the most *generalized* perceptions. There is a further problem in that the fundamentals of consciousness are age-old; and the subtle, individual intuitions nourished of modern science do not easily find recognition and equivalence in the natural poetic receptiveness of man, which has been formed half-consciously by response to those more general qualities of life treated by all poets from Homer to Hardy. A modern mind may chance on a perception, a unique and valuable perception; yet this may be capable of striking a chord in the sensibility of only a few specially educated readers, have a necessarily modern

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and narrowed scope of appeal. Then that poet has — what very few, for instance, of the turbulent poetic revolutionaries of contemporary Paris will care to do — to work outwards through this particular and unrecognized, to a more universal and familiar vein of feeling; and thence to lead his audience inwards again from the old and familiar perception to the unfamiliar recognition which is, after all, its natural development and offshoot. The new poet has to make himself clear by wider reference; and thence to educate his audience into the narrowed and newer problem of his own consciousness; and to point what alone gives him value — his relation to the homogeneity of human consciousness. The perceptual capacity of man is an infinite and mainly uncharted expanse. So it cannot be explored save by those who maintain their contact with the main trails of exploration, as it were; with the traditional consciousness of man as descended through the ages of literary thought. Our traditional perceptions have, to all intents, come down to the four or five important modern literatures from the relics of Greece and Rome, and come with very slight connecting link. The Dark Ages bequeathed a legacy of hereditary sensibility and perception that was formless and mute till at the Renaissance it was moulded exclusively by the revived forces of

Greece and Rome. Then it took forms differing with racial variations of feeling, and descended through as many currents as there are durable traditions in European literatures – and such a literature as the American, which derives from Europe.

So, if we agree that the poetic explorer, the prophet of a future era of literary thought, needs continuously to go back, as it were, and re-establish his contact with the main currents of traditional feeling, we find ourselves faced first of all with the problem: in what way has the relation been most imperfectly maintained? When we reflect how much of the ancient and modern literature relevant to our thought has proceeded in great measure from what has been indicated as the classicist impulse, the question seems to answer itself, and our digressions to tend to a more tangible conclusion. The classical element of art has lost its hold just as surely in 'technique,' in manner of language, as in other respects: and the intimate relation which I have tried to demonstrate in my section on 'Classicism' between that attitude to life and the precision and economy and coherency of imagery and emotional reference which contemporary poetry so signally lacks, becomes relevant.

Even if finally we concede that romanticism is the natural vein of feeling in the English-speaking world,

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there remains the difficulty that our literature rose from an ancient tradition predominantly classicist. Are we to assume that the 'romantic' urge in our blood is the inescapable legacy of our romantic forefathers? Can an unlettered race bequeath a manner of artistic emotion so powerful as to distort the derived cultural forces that alone make the emotion articulate? Were the most characteristic Elizabethans independent of the impulse that prevailed in Greek and Roman art, yet Milton and Dryden wholly victims to it? Or did temperament, in a greater or less degree conditioned by a 'romantic' strain in their barbaric forbears, drive our earlier writers in greater or less degree to select the romantic, post-Euripidean element of antiquity as the influence of their creative sensibility? Would such a selection be possible? (The question, to what extent can one control one's cultural influences, is very important to the study of poetry.)

No, the absolutists of romanticism cannot carry the day; even though they fall back (as they have done) upon habits of religious education as the determinant of a nation's consciousness — making Roman Catholicism the parent of classicism in modern Europe and our own manner of Christianity its solvent. The ultra-romantics would do better to recognize that the

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ignored classicist streak in themselves has salved them from utter chaos. Romanticism is acquired as well as instinctive. Religious organization, no more than a hierarchy of literary models, can utterly dominate the creative consciousness of a people. Further, the religious precepts of English convention inculcate something very different from, quite antagonistic to, the inevitable element of egoism and self-sufficiency in romanticism. It is a poor and barren thing, really, to fancy oneself the Master of one's Fate and the Captain of one's Soul.

It looks, then, as if the salvation of the modern romantic spirit in its general as apart from its outstanding achievements, must lie in discipline and self-repression. This conclusion leaves the classicist element important rather as a means than as an end: and that can, I think, be accepted as a natural and helpful interpretation. Classicism must not be ignored, firstly, because it is a condition of re-establishing full contact with the history of the human mind in art. Secondly because it is bound up with a 'technical' precision and finality in literary art which the romantic of his nature is sure to lose, and with which only the greatest romantics can afford to dispense. Thirdly, because the entirely romantic habit of feeling has led to an indiscriminate derivativeness; and

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the classical habit of feeling would cultivate and be cultivated by an instinctive reference to more austere literary models. Fourthly, because a greater detachment in self-examination should serve to separate the wheat from the chaff in the minds of a race of writers given over to the introspective self-absorption of the modern democratic ego. Lastly, where the classical element does appear – necessarily self-induced and consciously cultivated to some extent, and showing itself rather in method than in spiritual attitude – it justifies itself. The detachment of the truly objective *genre* poet is in effect, though not in philosophical nature, a kind of elementary ‘relation of values.’ To return to my tentative distinction, the classicist is he to whom values are relative; the romantic, he to whom values are absolute. Between the two extremes of this statement lies the whole complex octave of æsthetic sensibility as it shapes itself to express its views of human destiny and its environment.

To discuss hopefully the prospect of a ‘revival’ is not to show reactionary sympathy; but rather to imply a belief in the necessity of progress. The lyrical poetry of to-day is romantic to a degree unprecedented save in the wild phrases of the nineteenth-century France; and it is obviously becoming stagnant. In literature, as in politics, democracy has

served its turn; and has achieved much. The time is due for the opposite impulse to have a little scope again. Unfortunately it has almost lost the power of action. The general ear, too, is slow and reluctant to adjust itself to the tones of an acceptance whose earlier and great exemplars it has forgotten or has never known. To give an instance, at the risk of a smile among the sophisticated: Mr. Eden Phillpotts is a writer of very marked faults and limitations. He has not the calibre, the 'timbre' of a great artist. Yet his Dartmoor novels, *Demeter's Daughter* and *The Secret Woman*, are far nearer in impulse and movement to Sophoclean tragedy than anything of similar scope that recent times have brought to light in England. They are the very reproduction of its detachment, its semi-coldness, its inevitableness and its finality. They are utterly unlike any of the contemporary works to which they are carelessly compared. I only know of one writer (and he an anonymous reviewer in the *Athenæum*) who has ever remarked this; and I am sure his readers did not believe him – at least no other body of readers would! We have come to regard as the values of art the value of the *ego* expressed – or seeking expression. But the true worth of art derives from its relation to the perceptual consciousness of mankind: not merely *in esse*

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but *in posse*. It is true that a piece of writing cannot practicably be assessed without taking chief account of the personality that engendered it. But, critically, the personality is infinitely less important than the art; the art has reference to something altogether more universal than any single mind.

But this is rather full measure of abstract argument; and excess of philosophy, as surely as lack of it, may 'spoil everything.' It is now time to examine the position of H. D., who has a great interest of her own beside and above being the illustrant of some of the theories I have been advancing in the last two chapters. Some threads of reasoning must be resumed in the light of further illustration, in the concluding chapter of this essay.

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WE have now reached, by howsoever devious ways, a point whence – I hope – H. D.'s work and its significance can be seen in some sort of relation to contemporary letters. The treatment which I am giving to her work in this book is not proportioned to her rank as a poet. She has no 'rank': there is no precise point of contact. There are some to whom her peculiar genius may in itself seem to be the most significant revelation in English poetry – Wilfred Owen may be excepted – during the last decade. There are others to whom such a claim will appear indefensible – and most of them if pressed for reasons will fly the banner of a self-conscious preoccupation with 'life' in the modern sense. But to H. D. herself 'beauty is set apart.' To this attitude she has adhered with entire consistency. It is part of the quality of her classicism. It is closely related to the secret of her technical uniqueness. The classical sufficiency of her delicately chiselled verses is in the last analysis referable to this new method of emotional constraint. I do not necessarily assume that H. D. is a classicist in the ultimate spiritual sense; I doubt if there be any modern writer of English who is not to some extent the child of our romantic heritage. To claim that H. D.'s poetic achievement is of its essence classical, yet to admit that she has no ulti-

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mate comprehension of life akin to that of the great classicist poets of that Greek civilization whose conception of beauty infuses all her work, is to place her as a 'minor' poet. That position I accept, with such reservations as may emerge.

What is 'genius'? No two definitions would be likely to agree: but in my sense it may be called best an individual, unique, significant realization of a universal quality in things. Thus it is capable, *if extended*, of touching the whole of life with its quality. In the very greatest writers it only shows itself intermittently; but that is because creative concentration is bound persistently to relax, a point with which I have dealt in my section on 'Romanticism and Language.' Thus genius is always originality *in posse*; and in its difference from the perceptions of others there is a certain consistency.

The nature of H. D.'s genius may be indicated, very roughly, by saying that she has 'a foot in two camps' — a life in two different civilizations. She is a modern; as all of us willy-nilly must be. She has a modern emotional sensitiveness (which has become quite explicit in the 'Heliodora' collection): she has a twentieth-century 'technique of perception,' of purely æsthetic perception. One could in some measure apply Pater's celebrated phrase to her simplest utter-

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ance: strangeness is added to beauty and curiosity to desire. But one could not possibly swing to the other extreme and say that her affinity to Greece is not of spirit but of manner. Her technical method is modern to a degree. In the superficial sense she has no technical filiation at all, for explicit *vers libre* is virtually a new thing, except for irrelevant French precursors. But in a slightly more profound sense, the most remarkable thing about her rhythmic movement is not 'freeness' but restraint. Restraint *is* a thing which may be best sought for in the classical literatures.

H. D.'s saturation with the spirit of Greek mythology – it cannot be missed in her slightest word – is not explicable as the product of study. The most learned of modern poets, Swinburne, Symonds, Andrew Lang, show hardly more trace of it than do the least instructed. It seems to be the inevitable development of a kind of temperament, to which genius has for once given articulation. A literary preoccupation with the values of modern life might blemish it; but one imagines that H. D. has a mysterious (and most enviable!) faculty of keeping the transiencies of modern life and the spirit of poetry in different compartments of the mind.

A flight from life, the humanist might be expected

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to object of H. D.'s lyrics. Well, perhaps an escape. But the poet has not to take the whole field of thought as his province, (a point I have laboured to establish); nor does one ask everything of the same poet. Lest I seem to lose proportion, it had better be said that H. D.'s scope (at least, her characteristic scope) is narrow. At the same time it may be retorted that her poetry is of a kind to which scope has uniquely slight application. With other poets of modern life, we are compelled to go on asking for a wider apprehension, a broader spiritual awareness more fundamentally expressed. But H. D. implies what the others do not, that she is asserting no spiritual attitude of her own; but building upon traditional assumptions. She assumes that what may be called the moral factor in our reception will demand of beauty what the Greeks were content to demand. Her spiritual instincts are, inevitably, removed beyond measure from the Greek; but the beauty she offers us is the beauty she has learned from Greece, and in its most characteristic aspects it is a tangible, even a physical expression.

This brings us to the everlasting question of the Image. I think that I have made clear my central theory of the function of the symbol in literary creation. If so, I shall surely not be suspected either of

covert discipleship to the 'Imagist' school of poets, or of a dilettanti contempt for their views on poetic style. Indeed, I recognize much that is to the point in their agitations. But the principal reason for their appearance at this juncture is their close association with H. D.'s work. I do not, for reasons already implied, believe that H. D. derives anything really important from Imagism. (For one thing, doves do not beget eagles; and æsthetic theories do not beget genius.) Were I not refuted by chronology, I could more easily believe that Imagism was the half-conscious offshoot of H. D.'s lyrical method.

H. D. is an American, a native of Pennsylvania, and it is or will be a generally known fact of literary history that for some years before the publication of her first volume, *Sea Garden*, and during her composition of the translations of Euripides' choruses she lived in England, in literary association with the leaders of the Imagist school of poetry. The biography of contemporary poets is no part of my business in criticism; but here it has an undeniable æsthetic relevancy. H. D.'s poetry is described in a new manual of American literature as 'the most perfect embodiment of the Imagist theory' (which, indeed, stated in just those terms, involves no false implication); moreover she has quite recently been 'regarded

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by a well-known literary journal as 'the best of the Imagist poets.' The Imagists are (like the holder of even more subversive views!) entitled to their due: so here is transcribed their manifesto as put forth in *Poetry* by Messrs. F. S. Flint and Ezra Pound some ten or twelve years ago.

1. 'An "Image" is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.' The instantaneous presentation of such an image gives the sense of liberation from limits of time and space and that sense of sudden growth which we experience in the presence of great art. 'It is better to produce one image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works.'

2. Treat the 'thing' that is, the image, 'directly,' whether it is subjective or objective. 'Go in fear of "abstractions," that is, use concrete images having the hardness as of cut-stone.'

3. 'Use absolutely no word that "does not contribute to the presentation." "Use either no ornament or good ornament." Do not "mop up" the particular decorative imagery of some one or two poets that you happen to admire.'

4. Study Sappho, Catullus, Villon, Dante, Heine, and Gautier (sometimes), and Chaucer, especially.

5. Do not attempt philosophical or descriptive poetry.

6. 'Compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.'

7. Study 'cadences,' the finest that you can discover, preferably in a foreign language so that the meaning of the words may be less likely to divert 'your attention from the movement'. Saxon charms, Hebridean folk-songs, Dante, and the lyrics of Goethe and Shakespeare (apart from their meaning) are especially recommended.

8. Study the possibilities of verse-forms as the musician studies musical construction. 'The same laws govern, and you are bound by no others.'

In other words, the recognized metrical standards in English do not hold.

Objections to this are manifold. You cannot get hold of a 'complex' by a single image; you need a variety of successive images. Art does not give us a growth — that is a heresy allied to the 'flux' philosophy of Bergson, James and others too fashionable in literary circles — it gives us realization of what was there before. An isolated image could hardly have significance without a wider relation; and there is no opposition in the voluminous works, for they could hardly become 'works' at all without images, however impure.

A 'thing' cannot be subjective; it is arguable that it is inevitably subjectified to some degree when æsthetically realized. You cannot relate your images and erect them into a vision of life without

admitting your abstractions – unless ‘abstractions’ merely means the ontological incubus which the Imagists are not the first to oppose.

Rule number three seems very sound and forcible. The poets we are recommended to study do not appear to have much in common that is not also common to other good poets. The Preface to Gautier’s *Emaux et Camées* would make a weird commentary on Imagism, despite the surface similarity of its best known dictum. Dante is noticeably concrete in his symbols; but he has that something beyond, that ultimate philosophical unity in which his fellows in the list and the Imagists are alike deficient; and he is a dangerous commentary on their achievement. We are told further on to avoid philosophy yet also ‘descriptive’ poetry. Surely all poetry is either philosophical or descriptive, or purely subjective – the thing the Imagists most fear. The very function of an Image is descriptive, unless the word is to be impossibly contorted; and the question of ‘digressive’ beauty arises – are we to rule this out altogether, then how Dante?

If we are not to compose in sequence of the metronome, and *unite* it with the musical phrase, we must all write *vers libre*. That is possible: but how came the seven plausible poets just instanced to be worthy

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of study before *vers libre* was 'thought on'? If we are to study cadences – preferably, it seems, in a language we do not understand – it is purely as an exercise for the metrical ear; but why is Dante to be trusted with his meaning and not Goethe or Shakespeare? Or is it assumed that the meaning of the Italian, but not of the German, escapes us!

There seems a heresy bound up in the analogy of musical construction. Granted that poetry, like music, creates rather than is created by its meaning: the poet composes in terms that are directly referable to actual things or ideas which the recipient is entitled to find in a dictionary, and these terms have to be related in the medium of a recognizable form of grammar and syntax. There is no parallel to this in musical notes and chords: an individual note or combination of notes does not *mean* anything until related to other notes. So the writer is 'bound' by other laws. Lastly, there are no recognized metrical standards in English. There is an organic rhythmic law, to overleap which is death; and within that rhythmic law all is freedom; and this freedom has been generally recognized since the great Romantic revival.

However, one of the chief things that does strike the reader of H. D. is her instinctive attention to the precise and tangible image. It has a more than Greek

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definiteness; the definiteness of one who is striving to differentiate her perceptions from the common confusion; to recapture by indirect means a lost art, the secret of which lay in an emotional attitude that Time has swallowed up. In her early volume of 1916 there is little *explicit* reference to Greece; we may detect here and there a certain strain towards over-precision of reference between perception and image. 'The Contest' is the most pronounced example of this; in consequence it is not a very good poem.

Your stature is modelled
with straight tool-edge;
you are chiselled like rocks
that are eaten into by the sea. . . .
You are white – a limb of cypress
bent under a weight of snow. . . .
The narcissus has copied the arch
of your slight breast;
your feet are citron-flowers,
your knees, cut from white ash.
your thighs are rock-cistus. . . .

and so on. The tool-edge is straight enough; but there are signs of the prentice in its carving. It is like an experiment in method; lacks the grace of subdual to a moulding impulse. But the impression of Hellenic inspiration cannot be denied; it is all-suffusing. And it is from the method we see crudely

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forming here, the Hellenic air now softened with the greater delicacy of the art, that emerges further on the quite astonishing simplicity and freshness and completeness of 'Sea Gods.' These much abused Deities are greeted with unexpected sympathy.

They say there is no hope –
sand-drift – rocks – rubble of the sea –
the broken hulk of a ship,
hung with shreds of rope,
pallid under the cracked pitch
they say there is no hope
to conjure you –
no whip of the tongue to anger you –
no hate of words
you must rise to refute. . . .

But—

But we bring violets,
great masses – single, sweet,
wood-violets, stream violets,
violets from a wet marsh. . . .
Yellow violets' gold,
burnt with a rare tint –
violets like red ash
among tufts of grass. . . .
We bring the hyacinth-violet –
sweet, bare, chill to the touch –
and violets whiter than the in-rush
of your own white-surf.

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That last image happens to be the most memorable thing in *Sea Garden*, and it is these violets, one suspects, that win from the sea-gods a strange requital.

You will draw back,
and the ripple on the sand-shelf
will be witness of your track.
O privet-white, you will paint
the lintel of wet sand with froth . . .
you will come
you will answer our taut hearts,
you will break the lie of men's thoughts,
and cherish and shelter us.

What is it — before leaving this early volume — what is it about the image of the white violets that takes the breath with beauty? There is no spiritual meaning, true. But so long as there is in the reader a spiritual quality that responds to the beauty of a breaking wave or the appeal of an opening violet, that passage achieves its purpose of spiritual evocation. The idea is commonplace. But a poet, as I have tried to insist, does not mind that; poetry has its own way of transmuting the commonplace. Anything can be made to 'answer our taut hearts'; it depends on the making.

Sea Garden attracted some little attention, especially in the inner circles of American criticism. Its

technical freshness, the surprising shortness of lines, the delicate and crisp imagery, the redoubtable penetration of the haze that divides us from Greek beauty, began to emerge as the characteristic of a definite poet. In this book H. D. did to a degree, 'go in fear of abstractions,' or the Imagist principle: and the one poem, 'The Gift,' where philosophy is hinted, is, consistently, among the less impressive. But H. D. has established the power to use *heu* as an exclamation in a poem that has no Greek theme, and to use it without surprising any reader.

In her translations — they are not very literal — from Euripides, H. D. moves more definitely towards that inevitable form and detachment from personal emotion in the presentation that relates her to so much that is valuable in true classicism. The slight discipline of her original is salutary. She exhibits indeed a more feminine spirit than is found in Greek literature generally, though she nowhere, before her definite turn in 'Heliodora', approaches the really romantic abandonment of Sappho. (Sappho with her 'heart's own passion,' her supreme quest of beauty in this *διττω τίς ἐράται*, was a romantic pioneer.)

It is difficult to guess why H. D. chose to translate so peculiar and uncharacteristic a play of Euripides as

the *Iphigenia in Aulis*. But Euripides' romantic philosophy, in greater or less evidence in different plays, is not really of central importance to her. The *Iphigenia in Aulis* is a very late work, written when Euripides was at the turning of the ways. He made it the vehicle of those experiments in structural change which his last phase of thought was to necessitate. It is a startling contrast to the great *Bacchæ*. It is relatively commonplace, except in the character-drawing, which is keen and diverting, and inclines to the spirit of Menander's new vein of comedy. Professor Norwood has gone so far as to call Euripides' Achilles 'the spiritual ancestor of Mr. Shaw's Sergius Saranoff.' Moreover, the play is in parts very badly preserved. It happens, however, to have received a translation in French which is about the best, from the poetical point of view, ever made of an Euripidean drama.

H. D. has not Euripides' romantic, questing, pre-occupation, her language is more 'complete,' more self-contained emotionally, has less 'potential' force, than his. We lose the sceptic's 'ragged edges'; though of course we also lose the sceptical suggestiveness. There is a notably slight difference between the tone of H. D.'s translations and that of her original work; but the secret of that will not be

thought obscure. Professor Saintsbury has distinguished three kinds of translation: one which reproduces the letter as accurately as possible: one which aims at the spirit of the original without too close attention to the letter: the third which outright 'recreates from the same material,' and is admittedly the expression of a new temperament. H. D.'s versions of Euripides fall definitely into the third category; they are as decidedly re-creations as are in different ways Pope's *Iliad* and Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám*.

The only notable critic whom I have read on these translations is Mr. T. S. Eliot; in whose opinion H. D.'s choruses are 'much nearer to both Greek and English' than those of the best known English translator. Mr. Eliot qualifies this approval by a reference to errors and 'occasional omissions of difficult passages'; and adds that H. D. has only picked up a few of the more romantic crumbs of Greek literature, she has not shown herself competent to tackle the *Agamemnon*. I allude to these remarks as they seem to me to show that the most intelligent appreciation can miss the mark when it is not held in the light of consideration of the poet's work *as a whole*. Surely the errors are due to the 're-creating' attitude towards translation that H. D. has adopted; and which

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has its admitted faults *as* a method of translation, from the point of view of the original. The omission of difficult passages is irrelevant to the purely lyrical treatment of the purely choral parts of what happens to be something more coherent in its dramatic whole. I think that H. D. herself was ill-advised in her choice of the romantic crumbs; she would have done herself fuller justice in the severely classical parts of Greek lyric. But the *Agamemnon* . . . !

H. D.'s intensely *physical* conception of beauty is clearly in evidence in these choruses. They are remarkable, too, for an almost exaggerated simplicity of manner and phrasing. Notice how clean-cut is the opening poem in which the women of Colchis tell of the Greek heroes encamped before sailing for Troy. The theme is a tremendous one; but the evocation of feeling is brought about by language that reads almost like a bare description.

I crept through the woods
Between the altars;
Artemis haunts the place,
Shame, scarlet, fresh-opened – a flower,
Strikes across my face,
And sudden – light upon the shields,
Low huts – the armed Greeks,
Circles of horses.

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I have longed for this.
I have seen Ajax
I have known Protesilaos
And that other Ajax – Salamis' light.
They counted ivory-discs,
They moved them – they laughed.
They were seated together
On the sand-ridges. . . .

Achilles had strapped the wind
About his ankles,
He brushed rocks
The waves had flung.
He ran in armour. . . .

Here the deliberate whittling-down of Euripides' descriptive eloquence is very evident. Digression is carefully sacrificed to stark directness of presentation. The æsthetic appeal is conveyed by the minimum of obvious effort. The cumulative effect of this disciplined language can be fully experienced where the emotion of Euripides' women at its most intense moment is allowed to become for an instant explicit; the objective yields place to a personal symbol; immediately the detached stark statement is resumed, and continued till the last line of the chorus affirms once more the unforgettable experience.

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If a god should stand here
He could not speak
At the sight of ships
Circled with ships.

This beauty is too much
For any woman.
It is burnt across my eyes . . .

My mind is graven with ships.

The most characteristic passage, however, is that in which the women address Iphigenia when 'the terror is cast upon her,' as she goes forth to the sacrifice. The Greek lines have a haunting and rebellious pathos; this is something slighter indeed, but intrinsically different.

Your hair is scattered light
The Greeks will bind it with petals.
And like a little beast,
Dappled and without horns,
That scampered on the hill-rocks,
They will leave you
With stained throat —
Though you never cropped hill-grass
To the reed-cry
And the shepherd's note.

Some Greek here is cheated
And your mother's court
Of its bride.

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And we ask this – where truth is,
Of what use is valour and is worth ?
For evil has conquered the race,
There is no power but in base men,
Nor any man whom the gods do not hate.

The singleness of mind, the essential lack of complexity in thought – it is, indeed, a limitation judged by the serious standards of a translator – which marks H. D.'s versions is curiously instanced in the note of these last lines, as rendering one of the most memorable outbursts of Euripides' scepticism. There may be a possibility of double interpretation; profound atheistic rebellion and blank naïve statement that the gods in the course of things hate. But I think it is clearly indicative of H. D.'s attitude of acceptance; a corollary of her classical faculty. The gropings of the Greek seem not to trouble her, *as a poet*.

To the second edition of the *Iphigenia* there is appended a version of the choruses of the *Hippolytus*. It has perhaps in some ways a better subject, and is more literal in treatment, but it presents no particular qualities which are not covered by the earlier choruses. The same level of careful and economical presentation is sustained. It will be more profitable to turn to the fuller development of the poet's attitude in *Hymen*.

In the lyrics of the *Hymen* volume (published in

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1921), H. D. reaches what is definitely her purest and most characteristic medium. She throws off the slight technical self-consciousness of *Sea Garden*, is free of the restraint of Euripides' original (a useful discipline, but too narrow as an end), and clears the ground by adopting, almost exclusively, Greek themes. The title-piece 'Hymen,'¹ a kind of choral pageant or dramatic prothalamium staged in the temple of Hera, is not important. It is musical, and exquisitely worded; but slight, and marred or over-weighted by the elaborately decorative effects of the stage directions. The choral verse does not sound freshly and naturally in so artificial a setting.

We have here, in the lyrics, the opportunity to consider H. D.'s classic method of approach in its fullest significance. It is arguable that, though a classicist, she appeals to the intellect through the emotions rather than by the opposite process of the most detached artists in that tradition. In discussing Marvell in his relation to the Roman poets I said, indeed, that in the strongest poetry of their type the æsthetic functions of the creative mind operated *within* the action of quite conscious intellectual apprehension of the whole subject. But this does not involve a split

¹*Hymen* in italics refers to the volume to which it gives its name. 'Hymen' to the title-piece.

in the classical camp. The difference, which baldly stated sounds fundamental, is in effect a matter of degree; a slight sway of the individual propensity to one side or the other. Pushing the analysis further, we see that the poet works his effect by the symbol. This central act of symbolization follows the basic perception, which is strictly neither emotional nor intellectual but æsthetic; it precedes the acts of relation and synthesis, which are to some degree intellectual, but more or less rational according as the poet's romantic attitude to things or classic detachment from emotional intervention sways him.

It is possible for one's observation of life to be naturally emotional or naturally intellectual, and for one to be equally a classicist. This distinction is important in the case of H. D. Her perceptions are, so far as one can discern, highly emotional; the relation that lends them significance, she keeps detached and impersonal. Such an one might be called a deliberate or acquired classicist; and may have a view of ultimate things excluded from his particular artistic range which is quite romantic, as H. D.'s latest poems incline one to believe is the case with her.

H. D.'s classical austerity and restraint are not fully matured till *Hymen*. In the progress from *Sea Gar-*

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den to *Hymen* the extension and elaboration of precise imagery becomes more subordinated to deliberate emotional communication. The emotional impression, as the poetry grows stronger, derives less from the poet's own temperament and more from the attitude that is nourished by and re-creates the atmosphere of Greek remoteness and intensity. It is a quality of her classical restraint, that it is content to capture in a symbol some aspects of the beauty of this clear world of the past; and does not yearn, romantic-wise, to explain it wholly – does not languish after the intimate comprehension that remoteness of time and thought prevents the re-creator from wholly experiencing. The emotion behind *Sea Garden* is that of one who reaches out for beauty, glimpsed in a clean-cut simplicity; in *Hymen* – it is explicit in 'The Islands' – that of one who hearkens apart to the call of a beauty which she must not be content to seize upon, but must serve, ascetic priestess, in communicating its essence to the denizens of another world in time. 'What are the islands to me?' she asks.

if you hesitate,
what is Greece if you draw back
from the terror,
and cold splendour of song
and its bleak sacrifice?

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Justification of her faith is needed; yet it is almost too inherent and intimate a thing to be proclaimed. It seems to be whispered in the haunting prefatory verses of *Hymen*.

They said:
she is high and far and blind
in her high pride,
but now that my head is bowed
in sorrow, I find
she is most kind.

We have taken life, they said
blithely, not groped in a mist
for things that are not –
are if you will, but bloodless –
why ask happiness of the dead?
and my heart bled.

Ah, could they know
how violets throw strange fire,
red and purple and gold,
how they glow
gold and purple and red
where her feet tread.

From this 'high pride' of the austere spirit of old culture, of 'the dead' comes a solace when the accessibility of modern spiritual contact palls on us with its hollow speciousness. We take our beauty

carelessly to-day; and carelessly it treats us. Groping in an emotional haze apart, we see only the surface aspect of physical things.

The modern poet has forgotten how 'violets throw strange fire,' for the violet has no longer meaning save as a surface; it is not related to the intimate core of his emotional perception of life. The modern romantic has an indefinable spiritual yearning, and he has an eye for spiritual beauty, but that contact between the two that lends literature its power of liberating and crystallizing emotion, is easily lost. H. D. here makes the relation vivid by an acceptance of the relation that is deeply ingrained in traditional feeling.

H. D.'s work is at once near to and far from the contemporary spirit; so it is far from and near to the spirit of Greece. She is at double remove from the Anthologists whom in appeal she most resembles; for she writes another language and uses *that* language in a way of her own. H. D.'s beauty is really Greek in its whole atmosphere; yet it is not the precise beauty of the 'Greek Spirit.' In reality the Greek freshness of perception is drawn out from the haze of two thousand years with its precision clouded; and that precision is artificially restored by a deliberate concretization of the image. An illusion; but as I

have tried to explain before, there is in all art a kind of illusion that is one with truth. For instance, H. D.'s characteristic use of repetition is not a device of Greek lyric; but neither is it used in the English manner as a means of emotional diffusion (compare Swinburne); but as a means of intensification.

It is undeniable that H. D.'s meanings, or more precisely the *motives* of the soliloquists in her lyrics, are sometimes obscure. The reason is that they are based not merely upon an assumption of knowledge, but on the assumption of a manner of feeling that is too remote from the experience of most readers. 'Demeter,' one of her best poems, is difficult; and it might well puzzle the learned even more than the unlearned. There is emotion, semi-æsthetic, within the artist's detachment; and a dramatic detachment on the part of the soliloquizing goddess *within* that again. (The latter may or may not be truly 'historic.') I do not know that this necessary quotation in parts really increases the difficulty. The characteristic slow and elaborate opening movement will be noticed.

Men, fires, feasts,
 steps of temple, fore-stone, lintel.
 step of white altar, fire and after fire,
 slaughter before,
 fragment of burnt meat,

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deep mystery, grapple of mind to reach
the tense thought,
power and wealth, purpose and prayer alike,
(men, fires, feasts, temple-steps) – useless.

Useless to me who plant
wide feet on a mighty plinth . . .
useless the poppy-buds and the gold inset
of the spray of wheat.

There is no mistaking where we are; but unless we
ransack our learning too closely for parallels at best
fragmentary, it is not clear from the sequel what we
are to think about.

She is slender of waist
the goddess tells us, with a kind of divine aloofness
which may or may not be jealousy –

they have set her small feet
on many a plinth . . .
she they have smiled upon.

Whom? The rival Aphrodite! Or the ravished Per-
sephone! We are answered by a further enigma.

I will not stay in her breast
the great of limb.

And the stanza closes with an unmistakable allusion
to a desertion of the majestic Earth-goddess by Zeus;

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which fits neither Aphrodite nor Persephone. Demeter was angered against Zeus because he abetted Hades in the carrying-off of her daughter. But that would not account for the implied aversion to 'her.'

What I wish, in this digression, to establish is that this poem, great as is the power of its language, is not fully understandable to an ordinary reader. It is esoteric, no doubt unconsciously; and its appeal derives from part only of the whole realization, from that part which is exoteric. In the words of a reviewer of *Hymen*, words I certainly could not better, 'She combines precision of detail and clear presentation of the symbol with a kind of mystification as to the nature of the thing "symbolized."' This reverses the usual romantic process; where the aura of suggestion arises from the symbol; and the 'thing symbolized' is what the poet is trying to convey by dis-realizing it and making it *suggestive*.

The poetic residue is the opposite of the 'ragged edges' of romantic groping. It is quite obvious that the 'emancipated' technique which is a necessary condition of H. D.'s peculiar re-creation of things long past has its dangers, which are averted only by extreme control and intensity of creative effort. The romanticism of our age lurks near to the surface of every modern mind; and whatever may be the poten-

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tialities of H. D. as a romantic poet, they are something different from, and incompatible with, her Hellenic *milieu*. And the more ambitious the scope of her emotional liberation, in the Greek tradition, becomes, the more austere is the technical precision necessary to maintain objectiveness. This is mentioned less because of its application to H. D.'s present work than because it concerns all artificial reversion to a classical mode of æsthetic sensibility.

Let us consider a little more closely the principle of line- and phrase-division used by H. D., which is slightly different from that of other contemporary *vers libristes*. It will be convenient to quote a passage from *The Principles of English Metre*, by Mr. Egerton Smith, the Principal of Krishnagar College, who has stated very competently the average view of the newer metrical problems.

‘In irregular metres the rhyme has an important function, not merely as gratifying the expectation of recurrence, but also in holding the verse paragraph more tightly together. *Vers libres* in discarding form forgo an invaluable means of intensifying the antiphonies and setting off more clearly the varied cadences. Unrhymed *vers libres*, in fact, might almost as well be written continuously in prose (for the primary rhythm would be equally manifest in that form), were it not for the presumption that they

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were so divided to give effect to the poet's desire to balance the cadence of one section of the rhythmical continuum against that of the neighbouring sections. The division into these sections (lines or verses) will often be guided by the phrase or thought grouping, but on the other hand there will often be intentional overflow so that the sound and sense may set each other in relief.

When rhyme is absent, even more than when it is present, strength of phrase and rhythmic energy are demanded, and, above all, certainty of ear. Only thus can the poet compensate for the loss of that deep æsthetic pleasure which results from the recognition of recurrence and from the satisfaction of the instinctive craving for some principle of unity amidst variety of law amidst disorder and chaos.

The control and support of a law that manifests itself by prescribing determined and symmetrical forms and patterns can only be dispensed with in obedience to the imperious insistence of an internal law that expresses itself in the one throbbing rhythm which alone will illuminate the fullness of the poet's thought and feeling.'

One may or may not agree that in all kinds of poetry the expectation of recurrence and the tightening of the 'verse paragraph' are paramount features. The *vers libres* of H. D. must be classed quite definitely as unrhymed; for her occasional employment of rhyme or assonance is not part of her poetry's

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inherent rhythm; but an instinctive embellishment that does not derive its force from, or owe anything to, the reader's expectation.

The question of division is a more important and difficult one. The division of lines adopted by H. D. in her earlier poems was definitely 'Imagistic'; the isolation of phrase derived from and reinforced the great anxiety to isolate and intensify the single image. Her more mature work shows a natural inclination to a stronger continuity and blending of phrase and phrase, image and image; the progression becomes easier. But 'overflow' also is more pronounced.

White, O white face –
from disenchanted days
wither alike dark rose
and fiery bays;
no gift within our hands,
nor strength to praise,
only defeat and silence;
though we lift hands, disenchanted,
of small strength, nor raise
branch of the laurel
or the light of torch,
but fold the garment
on the riven locks,
yet hear, all-merciful, and touch
the fore-head, dim, unlit of pride and thought,
Mistress – be near!

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Give back the glamour to our will,
the thought; give back the tool,
the chisel; once we wrought
things not unworthy,
sandal and steel-clasp. . . .

This, from 'Prayer,' shows a more consecutive presentation than any of the previous pieces quoted; it also reveals clearly how the poet maintains an artistic tension and sustains her particular quality by a persistent presentation of the physical image, and by a short and sharp line division, which always conveys a peculiar and unexpected impression which would be lost by a different line division. But only a particular kind of phrase-grouping permits of being intensified by such line division. It must never be ignored that H. D.'s technical processes are to a very high degree *conscious*.

H. D.'s short line division is used not to crystallize the reader's attention, but to crystallize the 'meaning,' which is quite a different act. 'Meaning' has already been rather discounted in these pages as a term of criticism, and it is the emotional, not the intellectual or physical element of H. D.'s content that demands so persistent a 'strait lacing.'

H. D.'s sharp line division, then, is adopted in order to *exteriorize* the emotional quality which she puts

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into her poetry; to refer it, and so the reader's reception, constantly to the Greek note of apprehension. Awareness of Greek feeling is the necessary atmosphere of all H. D.'s most characteristic achievement. Wherever an idea, or phrase of modern English is expanded, the Greek impression weakens. Whenever an idea or phrase is simplified, crystallized and hardened, the Greek mode of receptiveness is suggested again. Here, surely, is the essence both of H. D.'s divergence from the ordinary motives of free verse, and of the danger to which, as a classicist, she is exposed.

The verse-division of *Hymen* is a less significant question. There is no 'overflow' here that 'sound and sense may set each other in relief,'¹ for it is the essence of this technical device that it suspends the reader's expectation and attention; H. D.'s peculiar method aims at the other extreme of keeping the reader's mind fastened almost constantly to the physical images used in presentation. Her effect is taken by concentrating the attention upon each image; each image in poetry is the culmination of a perception. The process of art is from perceptual culmination to perceptual culmination.

To revert briefly to Mr. Egerton Smith's prosodic touchstone: 'strength of phrase and rhythmic energy'

¹Egerton Smith, cf. p. 182.

are not often to seek in H. D.'s verse: 'certainty of ear' is humanly impossible; if only because we hear poetry partly with the bodily ear and partly with the ear of the soul – if the phrase be not too ugly – and we have to compromise, and the effect is not the same on all readers, for rhythm awakens different associations in different souls, and all souls are different. The most successful rhythm is that of which neither author nor reader is conscious.

The 'satisfaction of the instinctive craving for . . . law amidst disorder and chaos' will not, it is to be feared, be found in H. D.'s rhythmic achievement, though in a wider sense she gives something for which we crave amidst disorder and chaos and do not often find nowadays in the most 'correct' poets – either *libres* or traditional.

It is not necessary or practicable to give further consideration here to H. D.'s relation to the free verse movement; so from these brief notes I must turn to a more general estimate of her position on the basis of *Hymen* and a few later poems; in which estimate I hope to convey my view that H. D. is not merely 'within the laws' of true rhythmic feeling but the reviver and furbisher of a classical tradition of poetic expression. My quotations will probably be more effectual than my commentary.

XIV: THE POSITION OF H. D.

'STRANGE paradox!' wrote Miss Amy Lowell of H. D. some years ago, 'to be the prophet of a renewing art, and to spend one's life longing for a vanished loveliness!'

It is doubtful whether the 'renewing' art, if it is to have influence and disciples, can develop along lines at all similar to H. D.'s re-creation of a vanished loveliness. This sensibility to two so greatly divided phases of civilization, to their art and language, is rare, perhaps almost unique. The only 'Imagist' poet to work consistently upon Hellenic material, Mr. Richard Aldington, does not, for all his scholarship and accomplished verbal technique, give anything of the same impression — his sensibility is quite evidently English and modern, and the remaining poets of this group have not worked in consistency with any æsthetic tenets, defined or instinctive, and have developed in many and various ways, all quite definitely peculiar to the American mind; which ways it would be my duty to examine were this book not virtually confined to English poetry — which is not necessarily quite the same thing as the work of English poets.

It is rather evident that I am finding my attention distracted from 'the object' by the risk of misunderstanding inevitably bound up with any attempt to

study a contemporary with my eye fixed upon æsthetic values twenty-five centuries old. I am devoting chief attention to H. D. as a 'classicist' and I must asseverate that she is not a classicist because her *milieu* is Greek, and that Greek feeling does not always mean classicism. H. D. is not a *soi-disant* Greek (an impression which seems to have harassed and enraged the souls of many reviewers), and, even were she so, the fact would be irrelevant.

I have, in my preceding chapters, made as clear as I am able my perception of classicism, of its history and uses, and of the reasons and consequences of its present abeyance. This classical element I do find everywhere in *Hymen*, though, as I say, I am exceedingly doubtful whether *Hymen* can affect at all the future course of English poetry.

H. D. has translated (very freely) some of the Sapphic fragments, and, though these poems are far more beautiful than any close English version of Sappho, they are not quite translations. So I am choosing an intensely restrained poem from *Hymen* to set beside the sublime and passionate 'Anactoria' ode of Sappho to illustrate my last paragraph, and incidentally to set my subject in a more definite perspective.

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Let us have the Lesbian first¹:

φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
ἔμμεν ὦνῆρ, ὅστις ἐναντίος τοι
ἰζάνει καὶ πλησιον ἂδὺ φωνέν-
σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἡμερόεν τό μοι μὰν
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόασεν
ὥς σε γὰρ ἴδω βροχέως με φωνᾶς
οὐδὲν ἔτ' ἔικει·

ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲν γδῶσσα ἔαγε· λεπτόν δ'
αὐτίκα χρῶ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμακεν·
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδὲν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-
βεισι δ' ἄκουαι·

καὶ δέ μ' ἰδρῶς κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ
παῖσιν ἀργεῖ, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἐμμί. δεθνάκεν δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύην
φαίνομαι . . .

¹I append Addington Symonds' version, which has the metre and the 'meaning' – but not much else from the point of view of Sappho.

Peer of Gods he seemeth to me, the blissful
Man who sits and gazes at thee before him,
Close beside thee sits, and in silence hears thee
Silverly speaking.

Laughing love's low laughter. Oh this, this only
Stirs the troubled heart in my breast to tremble!
For should I but see thee a little moment,
Straight is my voice hushed.

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Here we have, in the most delicate *form* and rhythm, a passion more elemental, more simple, more intense than modern literature can show. Yet, the poem is, to my sense, romantic in feeling. It has, on the other hand, that *precision* and tangibility of imagery which is so much lacking in our modern English traditions – qualities which, I have argued, are associated with a classical spirit. I gladly leave it to a critic somewhat more influential than myself to expound the qualities of this piece of Sappho, trusting that readers will find in it some little support of my own judgment, and at the same time apply Longinus' standards to H. D.'s poem, with the reservation, in this particular instance, of *parva componere magnis*. For the standards of classical excellence advanced by the great Greek critic are perennial.

'In all things there are naturally components which make up their substance. So it is certain that one way to supreme excellence lies in systematic choice

Yea my tongue is broken, and through and through me
'Neath the flesh impalpable fire runs tingling;
Nothing see mine eyes, and a noise of roaring
Waves in my ear sounds;

Sweat runs down in rivers, a tremor seizes
All my limbs, and paler than grass in autumn,
Caught by pains of menacing death I falter,
Lost in the love-trance.

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of the most significant elements, and the ability to form one body, as it were, by combining them each with the others. Thus the listener is attracted first by the *selection* of the ideas, secondly by the cumulative effect of these. Sappho always chooses the emotions that go with unrestrained passion from their physical manifestations in real life. Where does she reveal her supremacy? In the skill with which she discerns and brings into unity the strongest and most intense evidences of passion. She aims at revealing a concourse of emotions, not one strong emotion only.'

Here is H. D.'s 'Evadne':

I first tasted under Apollo's lips
love and love sweetness,
I Evadne;
my hair is made of crisp violets
or hyacinth which the wind combs back
across some rock-shelf;
I Evadne
was mate of the god of light.

His hair was crisp to my mouth
as the flower of the crocus,
across my cheek,
cool as the silver cress
on Eros bank;
between my chin and throat
his mouth slipped over and over.

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Still between my arm and shoulder,
I feel the brush of his hair;
and my hands keep the gold they took
As they wandered over and over
That great arm-full of yellow flowers.

The ode of Sappho shows quite obviously a greater force of passion of language, and much stronger rhythm, in the widest sense of that word. In H. D.'s poems the 'concurrent emotions' bring about no intensification of language; they are merely symbolized, and are symbolized with such utter restraint that they seem almost to be no more than emotions aroused by the symbols. Unfortunately there is one phrase that seems 'off the note,' and the lines are slightly touched with a temperamental love of flowers (or their names) which, not being congenial to everyone, does lessen the æsthetic intensity. In her poem, no more than in Sappho's, is there an atom of creative energy spared or wasted. But the whole power of the Greek is concentrated into an overwhelming assertion of the *ego* in its deathless passion and pain, purified albeit in the white hot flame of artistic creation. Characteristic Greek lyric is less subjective, less personal; but Sappho is the only poetess of Greece of whom any actual achievement is preserved for us and can be used for comparison. (I think that

Sappho, almost alone among Euripides' predecessors, was haunted by the romantic sense of mystery, yearning, and rebellion against the scheme of things; but so simple, so direct and so perfectly crystallized are the emotions to which she gave brief utterance, that it does not affect her expression nor leave what I have called the 'ragged edges' of romantic groping).

Now 'Evadne' is so far from being 'personal' that it might be called personative. The author's emotion is conveyed through a medium as vicarious, as remote as could be. Yet its impulse is in no way dramatic; as is to some extent that of Mr. Housman's *Shropshire Lad*. The point is that H. D. has seen and felt her medium, not psychologically (for Evadne has no known or legendary character) but purely as a poetic entity. But what is conveyed to us is not a girl, nor a god, nor a kiss, nor yellow flowers but — *through* Evadne, the symbol — the existence of a world of beauty, that is quite unrelated to any personal emotion we can have experienced. Its existence is perceptible by reason of such powers of reversion to the Greek mode of sensibility as we have acquired through our acquaintance with Greek writings.

There is in H. D.'s, as in all true poetry a *quod semper quod ubique* appeal in certain outstanding places; but her achievement as a whole is conditioned

by this earlier phase of consciousness. The beauty of such poems as 'Evadne' is more confined, more tenuous — since it necessarily involves a technical artifice — than that of the best Greek lyric; but its cogency is of the same *order*.

But I doubt if one might not claim for 'Evadne' a more truly 'classical' tone, a nearer approximation to the classical ideals of detachment, restraint, calmness, moderation and balance than for most ancient — and so *a fortiori* most modern — literary expression of similar scope. That its technical method is most purely and intensely classical seems to me to admit of no doubt. It is only one out of many poems by H. D. that share the same qualities; but if this much may be conceded to 'Evadne,' to which I am convinced that no modern writer has produced a *resemblance* either in spirit or method; then no critic who is not ready positively to maintain, and demonstrate, that 'Evadne' is an insignificant poem can deny a real importance to such uniqueness.

'What then,' it will inevitably be asked, 'is the final, the sum significance of H. D.'s work to the "modern mind"?' '

One dare not speak nowadays of æsthetic delight as a reputable end in itself, and beyond that the significance is indirect. But as regards the mere delight it

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affords us something more intimate, more refreshing than would the discovery of the work of a Greek poet of equal value. Perhaps that is only the weakness of human nature. Perhaps it is due to the anticipation that a modern experience will add 'something rich and strange' to such exquisitely disciplined perceptions as the *milieu* and technical effort of H. D.'s earlier work have formed and nourished – in *Heliodora*, indeed, something of that anticipation is realized; but I cannot here carry my examination so far.

H. D.'s message, her philosophy? Well, the strictly classical writer must exteriorize personal attitudes towards things, and H. D. has been fairly true to her æsthetic nature there. None the less, there is inherent in her very approach to her art an outspoken yet unmistakable message.

‘Ah, could they know,
how violets throw strange fire . . .’

Beauty is apart, and we have lost the patience and the keen desire to know it. We need to pursue beauty with a more disciplined aloofness of mind and a more passionate devotion of soul. We must at once become as little children in spirit and prepare our judgments, our perceptions by the most mature ex-

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perience that can be gathered from the poetry and thought of all the ages. We cannot return to the world's infancy, but in its old age we can bring some offerings of simple and primitive emotion, shake some of the dew from these flowers upon the withered sophistication of poetry; for art, however sophisticated, should yet be touched with the dew of its morning.

This, I think, is the belief of H. D., and her creed, that it is given to every worshipper with vision to pierce the veil and to live, perhaps even (as she does herself) to make live, again. Beauty is not in all things around us.

'beauty is set apart,
beauty is cast by the sea,
a barren rock,
beauty is set about
with wrecks of ships.'

Beauty, in short, has not only to be revealed but to be sought with enchanted eyes. Enough ships have been wrecked in the eternal quest!

This I have gleaned from 'The Islands' and elsewhere, and very probably I am mistaken. I do not wholly agree (did I so, most of this book could not have been written); for one thing, my temperament will not let me; secondly, I am too much impressed

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by the deepened contact with life that the great romantics of later days have raised to supreme art; thirdly, I am sure that a lyrical apprehension stronger if less pure has gone together with tougher intellectual fibres; or, in other words, that 'wit' has its place in poetry, though that word must be carefully dated back some two and a half centuries.

But let 'The Islands' speak for itself; it is the most characteristic of all H. D.'s poems, and I need not ask pardon for quoting it as fully as possible:

What are the islands to me,
what is Greece,
what is Rhodes, Samos, Chios,
what is Paros facing west,
what is Crete?

What is Samothrace
rising like a ship,
what is Imbros rending the storm-waves
with its breast? . . .

What is Greece —
Sparta, rising like a rock,
Thebes, Athens,
what is Corinth? . . .

What can love of land give to me
that you have not —
what do the tall Spartans know,
and gentler Attic folk?

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What has Sparta and her women
more than this?

What are the islands to me
if you are lost . . .

'What has love of land given to you
that I have not'?

I have questioned Tyrians
where they sat
on the black ships
weighted with rich stuffs,
I have asked the Greeks
from the white ships
and Greeks from ships whose hulks
lay on the wet sand, scarlet
with great beaks.
I have asked bright Tyrians
and tall Greeks –
'what has love of land given you'?
And they answered – 'peace'. . . .

But beauty is set apart,
beauty is cast by the sea,
a barren rock,
beauty is set about
with wrecks of ships,
upon our coast, death keeps
the shallows – death waits
clutching toward us
from the deeps . . .

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Beauty is set apart
from the islands
and from Greece . . .

In my garden
the winds have beaten
the ripe lilies;
in my garden, the salt
has wilted the first flakes
of young narcissus,
and the lesser hyacinth,
and the salt has crept
under the leaves of the white hyacinth.

In my garden
even the wind-flowers lie flat,
broken by the wind at last.

What are the islands to me
if you are lost,
what is Paros to me
if your eyes draw back,
What is Milos
if you take fright of beauty,
terrible, torturous, isolated,
a barren rock? . . .

What are the islands to me
if you hesitate,
What is Greece if you draw back
from the terror
and cold splendour of song
and its bleak sacrifice?

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When H. D. is writing at this tension, at her best, we can see how much constraint is really concealed in the 'freedom' of her verse. It is for implacable opponents of *vers libres* to make out their case; for I for my part find it impossible to assume that such verse needs justification in its form. Such freedom seems to me to arise from the desire for greater intensity; it has an element of the 'acquired difficulty' in the French axiom I quoted before.

The supreme individuality, though it seems so simple, of H. D. is in the fact that she writes lyrics that are not introspective, not analyses of her own soul; yet have an unmistakable creative unity. Her delicacy and firmness of style, her purity and concision of language, set her in a niche of her own. The tiniest perception, be it only of

a red leaf
drenched and torn in the cold rain

is rendered distinct and fixed exactly in the mind's eye. In *Heliadora* the richness and expansiveness of feeling which she so long and so austere repressed come to us strengthened by consummate technical instincts; in her impassioned 're-workings' of Sappho, in the 'love' poems called 'Toward the Piræus,' in the deep, haunting charm of the title-

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piece, there lies material for a later and wider reckoning of her contribution to our literature. But because the more romantic material is not yet so fully mastered as was the earlier, and because to contemplate it is to distract the mind from the little classical revival of which H. D.'s genius is the moving impulse, I confine this study to H. D. the classicist. Still, I hope that Mr. Flint's early prophecy which I cited in beginning this book is in a fair way to realization, if not already realized. I will close by quoting in full, from *Heliodora*, a short poem that can hardly be damned as 'free' by the most austere; a poem on a subject which I think H. D., as an artist, need not seriously contemplate.

Lethe.

Nor skin nor hide nor fleece
 Shall cover you,
Nor curtain of crimson nor fine
Shelter of cedar-wood be over you
 Nor the fir-tree
 Nor the pine.

Nor sight of whin nor gorse
 Nor river-yew,
Nor fragrance of flowering bush
Nor wailing of reed-bird to waken you
 Nor of linnet
 Nor of thrush.

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Nor word nor touch nor sight
Of lover, you
Shall long through the night but for this;
The roll of the full tide to cover you
Without question,
Without kiss.

XV: CONCLUSION

I HAVE not attempted, in this survey of what I believe to be the most significant aspects of poetry at the present time, to make a précis of the achievement of each celebrated writer of contemporary verse. That is a work I leave to more tolerant hands. But I am sensible that there is something to be said for the average practitioner of the art in this country which could not come quite naturally in the course of my general treatment. We live in an age of consummate journalistic achievement. The ability to write good English and to 'put across' one's meaning for one's particular purpose, is amazingly widespread. Current letters are almost entirely devoid of crudity, in the more obvious sense. The contemporary verse-writer is usually a genuine artist with a nice regard for form and propriety of language. There is an absence of stridency, of blatant popular appeal and mere mercenary word-spinning in our reputable members of this profession — as in quite a good sense it has become. A few of the more violent revolutionaries and experimentalists do lapse in the directions I have just indicated, but they seem to do so from genuinely misguided motives.

But when we consider how profound is the inherent significance of poetry to the human soul; how deeply suggestive should be the impression left by any

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poetry that is really expressive of a very important epoch of the consciousness of man, and consider the effect of one, or the cumulative effect of many, of the numerous contemporary poets of wide repute, the sense of incongruous deficiency is too great. The present writer has gone scrupulously through the whole of a widely-acclaimed volume of 'Georgian Poetry,' not without pleasure, and afterwards reflected with consternation that never for an instant had he the sensation of being in contact with the serious creative intelligence of a great modern nation. The quality of the thought embodied seemed immeasurably inferior to that which goes to the making of a high-class review of letters or philosophy or scholarship. There was nothing to recall or suggest the impressive intellectual and moral traditions of English literature. A single passage from John Donne or Dryden or Thomas Hardy would have put ludicrously to rout page upon page of these subtle and ornate reflections. Nor must this be taken as an invidious example. The anthology in question is far less provincial and jejune than most of the verse which it excludes, and to fare very much better one would have to go to the work of carefully chosen individuals. But what is even more disturbing is the apparently general acquiescence in this strangely

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modest contentment of the gifted writers and their critical champions. It is as if recognized minor poets of our day, having won a sympathetic hearing, have at the same time lost all pretension to more than a dilettante and 'artistic' appeal. Imagine a serious critic, a Croce, a Babbitt, or a Santayana, going gravely to work to assess the Georgian collection, to relate it to the spiritual centre of the age and estimate its place in the evolution of the European mind! Yet a minor poetry that includes Mr. De La Mare and Mr. D. H. Lawrence, Mr. Abercrombie and Mr. Bottomley should be no unfair index to the creative impulse of its period.

Of the two latter poets I have already said my say; it is perhaps an accident that I did not find anything very representative of them in that particular volume. Mr. De La Mare and Mr. Lawrence have too obvious a significance to be entirely passed over in any survey of contemporary literature; though they are both representative of tendencies that seem to me quite remote alike from rich individuality and from what is or will be central and essential to the modern mind.

Mr. De La Mare is a writer whom the most sympathetic criticism has approached from many and incompatible angles. He passed through an early

and interesting period of technical virtuosity slightly analogous to that of Keats, though perhaps more intrinsically successful. To some judges these far-won verbal felicities remain the poet's most characteristic feat. To others Mr. De La Mare is the incarnation of fine simplicity. To others again he seems the embodiment of the essentially spiritual yearning for a Kingdom of Beauty aloof from the vexatious actualities of modern existence.

Certainly his uniqueness does lie in the alternating impressions of the most delicate human sensibility and of an unearthly detachment from the trammels of reality. But he is finally an idealist rather than a realist, and his ideals are in effect not so much spiritual as sensuo-æsthetic. The purely 'æsthetic' qualities of his work, his various and subtle achievements in pictorial and musical impressionism, would occupy a more sympathetic criticism for many pages. Mr. De La Mare is beyond cavil a very exquisite writer. But he has almost no passion or intellectual daring. He excels among dreamers by the quality of his dreams. But his work is anodyne; it has no tonic property. If one places him fairly in comparison beside another minor poet, H. D., one finds that though her work like his is something of an escape from life, she stimulates with an underlying passion

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and a courageous individuality which Mr. De La Mare wholly lacks. There are many refuges from the harrying complexity of modern life; there is the countryside of Mr. Masfield, there are the lotus-lands of Mr. De La Mare and the even more enervating haunts of those who have Mr. De La Mare's sensuous receptiveness without his soul. There are also the Greek islands of H. D. It is not a question of locality; but of the richness of the soul which responds by instinct to its impulse. One recalls Andrew Lang's sonnet on the Odyssey. The cap will fit many wearers – and what a world of criticism is there!

'As one that for a weary space hath lain
Lulled by the songs of Circe and her wine,
In gardens near the pale of Proserpine
Where that Æean Isle forgets the main.
And only the low lutes of love complain
And only the shadows of wan lovers pine –
As such a one were glad to know the brine
Salt on his lips, and the large air again.

So gladly, from the songs of modern speech
Men turn, and see the stars, and feel the free
Shrill wind beyond the close of heavy flowers;
And hear, 'mid music of the languid hours,
Like oceans breaking on a Western beach,
The surge and thunder of the Odyssey.'

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And Lang, though he had better aspirations, was a nineteenth-century romantic!

Mr. Lawrence is the antithesis of Mr. De La Mare, among the moderns. He has vigour, originality, and the 'realistic' impulse, to a degree. Whereas Mr. De La Mare is a poet instinctively, first and everywhere, Mr. Lawrence is not naturally the poet. He is essentially a novelist, and with discipline and the toleration of years he might become a great one. *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow* show him at an excellence he has scarcely approached since, and they are among the most remarkable works produced in our generation. But the essence of poetry is less criticism of life than belief in some fundamentals of it, and an intuitive indentification of this belief with the impulse to and love of beauty.

To Mr. Lawrence, beauty goes, not with love, but with hatred. He is the rejector of all things save the overwhelming egoism of his own soul. His yearnings are referable to no known standards of human experience. What is precious and lovely to others is hateful to him. Whatever is gentle, whatever is noble and of good report turns in the crucible of his intellect to something contemptible and trivial. He is the scoffer of humanity; yet his disillusionment is not the natural experience of thwarted moral striving,

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but the recoil of a soul that is inevitably dissatisfied with whatever is tolerable to others. Mr. Lawrence is not as other men.

The sincerity and power of his mind are above question. But whatever has been said of the deficiency of modern romanticism in poetry (except its derivativeness) applies supremely to Mr. Lawrence. Yet he has no point of contact with contemporary tendencies in literature, upon which criticism can seize. He is a *vers librist* who is indifferent to all organic principles of rhythm. He is a spiritual descendant of Whitman who has none of Whitman's robust humanity. He is an Englishman with virtually no part in the traditional and associative feeling that has come down through the ages as the common legacy of his fellows. He is the heritor of a Christian training in whose work the spirit of that faith has turned to incoherent revulsion and anarchy of soul. He criticizes too far from sympathy for judgment, and leads into strange dark forests of psychological speculation where none can really follow him. He is a brilliant thinker and an accomplished journalist, totally indifferent to all thought but his own and all themes but himself. He is an Ishmael whose Ishmaelism seems to have no motive but a desire to achieve the 'nakedness' of his own soul, to revel in it

and assert it by strange symbols. Here is one of his most recent poetical assertions, from a piece called 'St. Matthew,' which its author at least would not reject as uncharacteristic. Many will think such an instance unjust to his earlier and better work; but that is sufficiently well known, and there is no intention by this of disparaging it.

'Matthew I am, the man.

And I take the wings of morning, to Thee,
Crucified, Glorified.

But while flowers club their petals at evening
And rabbits make pills among the short grass
And long snakes quickly glide into the dark holes in
the wall hearing man approach,

I must be put down, Lord, in the afternoon,
And at evening I must leave off my wings of the
spirit,

As I leave off my braces,
And I must resume my nakedness like a fish, sinking
down the dark reversion of night

Like a fish seeking the bottom, Jesus.

'ΙΧΘΥΣ.

Face downwards

Veering slowly

Down between the steep slopes of darkness, fucus-
dark seaweed-fringed valleys of the waters
under the sea

Over the edge of the soundless cataract
Into the fathomless, bottomless pit

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Where my soul falls in the last throes of bottomless
convulsion, and is fallen
Utterly beyond Thee, Dove of the Spirit;
Beyond everything, except itself.'

Beyond everything, except itself . . . 'The prospect of delight, which alone justifies the perusal of poetry.' It will be seen why in spirit, in culture and in technical manner, Mr. Lawrence's poetry has no definable place in a study of contemporary work. He is a creature

'Moving about in worlds not realized.'

But truly prophetic art is something more recognizable. On many accounts Mr. Lawrence merits high praise; but it would be inconsistent to praise him here.

The great poet is as that tree which 'a breath stirs and nothing shakes.' Of that order our age has only one exemplar — another, perhaps, was cut off on the verge of his prime; cut off just when 'wisdom was his, and he had mastery.'

Walt Whitman, a prophet though not a great poet, pondered long upon the legacy of the past that shapes all our thoughts, pondered upon it long and then turned his back upon it.

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'Regarding it all intently a long time, then
dismissing it

I stand in my place with my own day here.'

Those of our poets who are genuinely modern have not regarded it intently enough; are too absorbed in themselves and their present to have that patience in them. Their denial of the past is an idle and unconvincing gesture. Of the two kinds, one can be forgiven for preferring those who are sceptical of the present and discreetly enamoured of the past. By their fruits . . . A writer can work out his own evolution in terms of thought without giving too much heed to all the accidentals of his physical place in time. It was one such, a Frenchman dead these hundred years, who said the last word on the condition of the artist's appeal, words that should be lettered in fire before the eyes of those who are satisfied in art to think only for themselves, indifferently roaming beyond the common legacy of understanding. It may seem to have a slightly cynical application; but is (all the more) cogent. 'The writers who influence us are only those who express perfectly what others think; who arouse in our minds ideas or feelings which were struggling for birth. *Literature exists at the bottom of minds.*'

Literature, in fact, cannot be creative unless it is

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evocative; though it may be evocative without being creative.

Our poetry has quite recently supplied one instance of work that is consummately evocative without having the originality of great creative art. This is the 'Philip' of Mr. Richard Church, the one remaining contemporary to whom I wish to make an allusion before bringing this survey to a close. This, the most subtle, accomplished and graceful poem of middle length – it has about 700 lines – produced lately in England, appeared in the pages of a magazine, where it attracted some attention in a limited circle of readers. It was reissued in booklet form three years later, and so far as I know was quite 'unsuccessful.' It was dismissed as unoriginal in a very short notice by our leading critical journal, and I have seen no attempt at a serious review of it, though Mr. Church's general reputation as a writer of lyrics is high enough to have given it a hearing. 'Philip' is a dramatic monologue, placed in the mouth of Our Lord's intellectual apostle in his old age at Antioch. It is a piece of profound and complex spiritual contemplation; clothed in blank verse of a rare and haunting beauty. It embodies the questioning spirit of romanticism at its highest and most restrained level. Too critical, it might seem, for the *abandon* of strong

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poetry; it is yet infused with flashes of compulsive insight, finding expression in imagery of rare distinction. Philip has 'privilege to speak' for he has 'sat with Christ at supper.' He is the serious and instinctive sceptic who has 'believed for the very work's sake.' His soul is avid of spiritual beauty; yet response is tempered by awareness of the indeterminateness of human destiny.

'man's desire
Shall never circumscribe the force of life
Nor harness with name and symbolic shape
The elusive all prevailing fire that lit
The singer David's heart, and forged in flame
Plato, the western dreamer whom I love.'

Omnia abeunt in mysterium.

'This flesh is accidental;
But the dream that lingers in my mind has been
Hovering with vital influence over man
Immemorially. Weigh the two, and feel
Earth's treasure trickle out between your fingers.'
Here is at once the central impulse and the unquenchable desiderium of romanticism.

'Doubt – doubt – eternal doubt assails me.
This is life's tragedy, to lack assurance,
Never to find abiding place, where the soul
May sleep awhile, unguarded, confident
Of imperishable divinity,

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Lulled by faith. And yet – it smacks of the
priests,
A comfortable creed, a fireside life.
I would not lose the biting recollection
Of windswept places, and the loneliness
Surrounding me in lands unpioneered,
Regions of stabbing darkness, where a man
Comes face to face with horror, the abyss.'

Romanticism has its inherent and ever-pregnant mystery that is something altogether higher than mysticism. Its eternal promise may have grown over familiar to us; the nature, the value to literature of a pervading conception of life's unattainable purpose is the changeless motive of romantic art. The impulse of this passage is not 'religion'; it is the more universal feeling which modern spiritual currents have made universal, after many generations.

'On such an eve as this it was, without
The city, dusk gathering under the green
Of the awakened trees, falling around pools
Whose deeps yet held a gleam of western light,
After the day's silence, a gentle swell
Of the foliage, a chill of the heart,
Joyful presage, anxious hope; while slowly
The land air passed away to sea. Earth moved
Uneasily, as though the Universe
Had made her centre of all scrutiny,

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Expectant of that deed of deeds, forefelt
Since first creation sprang, which instantly
Revealed, shall tear the veil hanging 'twixt flesh
And spirit, and show the common parentage
Of sound and silence. Such sweet promises
Life offers in abundance; they are the strength
Of beauty, and the lure of all our learning.
Still beauty promises, and still I learn
Though stooping o'er the grave . . .

My son, though life is not a thing of dreams,
Yet to the very end we grope our way
Half drugged with the strange poison of our
blood.

All serves the same deceit; courage, desire,
Poor timid reason, love, the glorious birth
And dying beauty of all terrestrial shapes:
These breed despair and keep our eyes from
vision.

Merged in the outer nothingness of death,
There shall I find perchance the source of life
Riven of form or any sensual moment;
All music ever on the verge of song,
Colour yet unborn within the ray,
The promise that shall never need fulfilment,
The timeless, spaceless core, before whom fall
Our vastly apprehended gods, our mystic
Rites of high communion, and our faiths;
Blossoms whose birth is predetermined failure;
Since birth means death, and beauty is decay.
Life, the inspiration, is none of these.'

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The considerable concentration upon the subject of modern poetry which this essay has entailed, has given the writer little reason to dissent from or modify the general views adumbrated in the opening section. An attempt has been made to look at the great productiveness of modern verse from a philosophical point of view; from the point of view to which any period of literature has its element of continuity, its place in history; from the point of view of literary method, the technique of the poet's art, and, to some extent pervading the whole, from the point of view of one individual critic's idea of literary standards – the point of view which legitimately varies with each critic. The task is a big one; at which only a fragmentary attempt is practicable. Something is achieved if the reader can be brought to feel that there is no 'all's well' or 'all's ill' with any literary period. It is too commonly assumed that we are all heading either straight for the stars or straight to the dogs. Both suppositions are grossly misleading. But our poets are, almost all, too contemptuous of criticism and too self-conscious about their own uniqueness. Both these phenomena are related to our severance from the classical element in tradition; though in a perfectly civilized country they would not necessarily follow that severance. (Matthew

Arnold might be quoted as a very good instance of a *disciplined* romantic sensibility – yet a sensibility how fine!) The modern mind does not exactly lack intelligence; but its intelligence is partial.

The race of genius, of poets (I am thinking of Arnold again) has ceased to feel for a cultural centre. We must not for a moment flatter ourselves that we have among us the supreme creative originality to which culture is unimportant. We are derivative of our essence. No poet of the English language since Thomas Hardy has shown great original powers of imagination, and even Mr. Hardy's verse might, without distorting our point of view, be said to derive from a conception and grasp of life's actual values which he has reached through the novelist's pursuits. He is nine-tenths a realist, and the occasional, transmuting flash of something beyond the scope of prose gains an added strength, sanity, coherence as it were, from its relation to a philosophy of life already made explicit. Thus it has a 'centre' more substantial than the lyrical condition of one soul. The state of mind in a poet realizing his intuitions, as has been said before, is an unbalanced state; a persistent, instinctive adjustment of values by the more detached functions of the intellect is the essential of true evocative power.

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While the attitude to current letters which this book reveals must of necessity appear to be mainly destructive, its author pleads that so far as has been possible without belying his 'philosophy' he has tried to regard the essentials of his subject with dispassionate seriousness. An austere, truly critical study of a period of prolific minor literature might too easily come to resemble a game of ninepins. The quality of modern thought in England can speak for itself – it has sufficient canvassers. But I feel impelled before closing to hint a doubt which had it been worked into the texture of this essay would have made a sympathetic and moderately inclusive consideration of our poetry even more difficult.

It is: whether we are not less in need of creative energy and freshness like that of the Elizabethans than of an atmosphere of criticism similar to that of nineteenth-century France. One looks in vain among the prominent creative writers of modern England for an intelligence with the self-adjustment, subtlety and 'centrality' of, say, a Sainte-Beuve, a Renan or an Anatole France. The centralized culture and awareness of a Jonson and a Dryden has been for centuries almost alien from our literature. (The question of classicism need not be dragged in here.) Partiality, 'one-leggedness' of understanding and

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sympathy affected all the most eminent English novelists of the last century: though it was absent from George Eliot. Pure intelligence seems ever inclined to wither in the atmosphere that a romantic tradition in the course of time always induces; though the greatest romantics have not been hampered by such a limitation. The English intelligence has now grown to be a partial, an unequal, and a more or less consciously egoistical thing. None of the most prominent novelists who have arisen in the present century is 'central' or cultured or intelligent as was, for instance, Henry James or Marcel Proust. We are reverting insidiously to a kind of provinciality and spiritual barbarism. The sense of egregious limitation in imaginative writers of great gifts and attainments has become omnipresent among us.

Such we are, as we were already in the day of Arnold's diagnosis. Such we shall remain until our perceptions can expend in a sphere of more free, more clear, more widely cultured and more centralized intelligence. Of course, important poetry may still be written and read. But the finest in art cannot be persistently evoked, and nourished, unless a critical receptiveness equally fine is forthcoming. Not precisely our criticism, but most of what we allow to

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pass as such, might well be the matter of scoff or wonderment to a refined Frenchman or Italian. We are not *brutal*; but *brutalité* does thrive in our midst. It happens we have a few critics and a few poets better than those of contemporary France; but that, one must suspect, is due to our far stronger natural creativeness. We have no centre. There is no 'English mind' as there is – or at any rate was and should be – a French mind. There is none who can discern and comprehend and embody the essence of ourselves, of our age. We are isolated individuals, and though individuality and a great measure of freedom be the essence of poetry, that is not the good thing it sounds. It would surely be well if the media through which culture is disseminated among us were less obviously contemptible – though they, as everything, might be salved and made to serve if the spirit were strong and willing. It would be better, surely, if pure literature were less inclined to blush and hide its face; if the autonomy of literature in the spiritual life of men were a really admitted fact.

Meanwhile, literature is becoming a more and more socially reputable activity, and that, without shallow cynicism, must be to the good. But the more dignified has grown the state of authorship, the vaster has

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waxed the throng of pretenders without (and within) the gates. In order that more can be admitted (for are we not equalitarians and democrats!) many other impulses and activities have been merged with pure letters, and obscured the vital issues to the short-sighted. But in truth nothing is so unique, so pure, and stands so much alone as literature. That is why impure forms of literature are no literature. That is why so much that passes, half ashamed, for critical writing merely serves subtly to undermine the understanding of literature for what it is; an independent, autonomous, and – in a sense of the phrase that will not be misunderstood – an all-embracing spiritual and intellectual manifestation of the essence and quality of life. For life is all we know.

Life, like sincerity, convictions and one or two other honest critical terms, has been given over to a cant; so the word 'existence' had better be substituted quickly. Art, poetry, is the re-creation of the human consciousness in its reaction to the whole of existence; experienced or yet to be so. Therefore expansion is the ultimate need. But the immediate need is eclectiveness. The expansiveness of modern romanticism has become more and more indiscriminate. Selectiveness is inclined to be sterile because the contemporary mind is too partial, too far from

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the centre to have a true motive and standard in its selections. So the limited view of literature of which this essay is the imperfect expression has thought it wiser to cry 'refine!' than to cry 'expand!'

We are not a generation of a race of geniuses whose divine prerogative it is to experiment without criticism and to develop our *ego* in indifference to established thought and recognizable æsthetic purposes. We are rather, the more fortunate of us, a technically efficient, well-informed, fairly 'sincere,' and in a way 'clever' people. We are not chronically unstable or chronically stolid of temperament. We have something of all the great literary traditions in us, and of these traditions the chief is our own native one.

So, to recapitulate the central argument very briefly, there are two kinds of freedom. One cries valorously:

'We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
That Milton held.'

(Whichever they be.)

The other says *civis Romanus sum*. We are all too quickly awake to the first slogan. Let us try to understand the spirit of the second, and earn the right to use it with a full intellectual and spiritual

meaning. It is not merely a question of imposing a classicism upon our romanticism.

An estimate of literature is bound to be truer geographically than geologically; it cannot miss the mountains, and it may miss remote significance of subsoil. A critic has to face the fact that he knows but a fragment of the whole; that there may be unknown writers who would provide him with a better prospective of what is most important to him in the age. Often, no doubt, Miltons not mute are by ill fortune inglorious. Perhaps nobody is to blame. Had the Sapphic remnants never been found, literature would have had only a legend instead of a unique and irreplaceable standard of achievement. But a critic might have realized the 'consciousness' of sixth-century Lesbos pretty much as well. The critic can only be expected to work on what does, to some degree, emerge. In an age of journalism the application is obvious. '*Der Mensch ist nur was er isst*,' declared Feuerbach. Not all is cynicism that seems so. The German scoffer might be satisfied if we said now of modern literature that it is only what it reviews!

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By H. P. COLLINS



A brilliant analysis of the significant aspects of present-day poetry, discussing the aims, methods, and importance of the modern English school of poets.

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